



Ned and Kim Bradford.

Batson-based, Bradford-built

Foliage may be fast becoming a commodity, but kindness and generosity certainly are not. Ned and Kim Bradford, the husband and wife team behind Zellwood, Fla.-based Bradford Botanicals, understand this intimately because they themselves have been the benefactors of such virtues.

By Brandi Danielle Thomas

Ned Bradford's dream of owning his own greenhouse business may have been planted in his future long before he even knew it would one day become a reality — when he was just a young boy pulling weeds for a quarter at his grandfather's landscape nursery. But it wasn't until 1990 that the real groundwork was laid for his future foliage operation. For four years, Ned worked as general manager at Batson's Greenhouses, entering into a lease-option agreement with owner Gene Batson that prepared him and wife Kim to purchase the farm in 1994. The Bradfords bought the Batson's inventory on consignment and then converted the loan at closing, operating the business as Bradford Botanicals for the past two years.

Why, one might ask, would Gene Batson, a business owner in an industry that struggles with low margins as it is, go out of his way to give a couple the opportunity to be entrepreneurs? Probably for the same reason he has done it for approximately a dozen others. "I think he truly enjoys helping people achieve their dreams when they don't have the wherewithal to do it on their own," said Ned. "And the other obvious reason is that it's fairly lucrative: We paid a very fair market value for this operation. Gene and Barb Batson probably did all right in the sale — they put a couple of people who were capable in a position to make good on a deal. I think probably his biggest reason for doing it is he really likes seeing people get ahead — 'hard work pays off' is kind of his philosophy."

CROPS AND CUSTOMERS

The Bradfords are growing nearly the same crops as those grown when the nursery belonged to Batson's — all indoor foliage. *Spathiphyllum* is the most predominant crop, with approximately 10 varieties covering 14 acres under saran in 4-, 6-, 8-, 10- and 14-inch containers. A 2 1/2-acre Dutch glass range is used for the cold-sensitive material, including *dieffenbachia*, represented in 15 varieties, 4- and 6-inch *nephthytis*, palms and *hederas*. They have trialed many different cultivars over the years, with *philodendron*, *calathea* and *anthurium* among the tried and tested, but have never grown them consistently as a large crop. "Just small crops — almost as loss leaders," Ned reflected.

Ninety-nine percent of what Ned and Kim grow is for the finished industry, with a significant portion of that coming from tissue culture. Their customer base is divided equally three ways: large greenhouse operations in the United States and Canada; brokers, through whom some product goes to chain stores; and "independent truckers." As Ned describes them, "If you drew an arc from Texas to Northern Virginia, that's about as far as someone can drive a truck to Florida, get a load of plants, drive back and distribute them in about a week. About a third of our product goes to florists that way

— people come down, load up a truckload of plants, take them back and sell to a florist route in their local county or town."

SPACE UTILIZATION IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND

Ned's experience has taught him to pour his energies into the true "leaders" — the *spathiphyllum* and select others — for his market and to transcend the state of just running his business well. He discovered a way to double his propagation space by growing stacked liners of *neanthe bella* palms (*Chamaedorea elegans*). They sow the liner trays and wrap them in plastic on heated benches, which in themselves become heated benches that crops are grown on top of while the *neanthe bella* are germinating. They sell the liners to independent growers and one broker throughout the United States.

The idea to do this was not so much a calculated choice as it was a gradually self-created path. And just as Ned's decision to dedicate his career to the art of growing may have had its roots in his grandfather's landscape nursery, the palm-propagation side of his business is also a part of his background that he may have never imagined would add so much value to his livelihood. Ned had already been growing 3-, 4-, 6- and 8-inch palms when he was working for Batson's and was also propagating a liner crop for the greenhouse's consumption. "I started sending some out to other growers in the area who were falling short on seed crop, and I ran into a couple of friends of mine who are brokers in different areas and showed them what we were doing. Over the years, we've increased to a pretty good crop size," Ned explained. "There's an adage in the foliage industry that the smaller the unit you sell, the more margin there is in it. It's a fractional margin, but you sell a lot more of them quicker and density is

One of Bradford's success secrets: Producing neanthe bella liners doubles propagation space and provides quick turns on a crop that would take two years to finish themselves.



better, so a liner crop was actually natural for us. We'd rather sell a palm as a liner than as an 8-inch pot. It's a lot easier and there's a lot less time involved in it. A liner crop in palms is a 6-month crop, and an 8-inch crop of palms is two years. So turning quicker keeps those dollars in action."

CONJUGAL COOPERATION

But it's more than just quick turns perpetuating the profits at this foliage operation. High output is half of the success equation; actually collecting on the product is the other. Ned and Kim have both sides of that formula chiseled down to a science — their 100 percent partnership, with Ned perfecting production and Kim making sense of the dollars down to the last cent, means Bradford achieves efficiency in both operations and finance.

"If I order materials from the wrong company — for whatever reason, sometimes it's because one company didn't have it and another did, she'll call me up and say, 'Hey, you paid 6/100 of a cent more per unit from these people than you did from the other people — what's going on with that?' And I'll have to justify that. She watches that closely."

That's just the internal side of things. Efficiency also means that any customer who doesn't pay up can expect a knock on their door. "I think most of the people who fall past her must have the mistaken impression that my wife is 7 feet tall and 280 lbs.," Ned laughed. "Because she really does a good job at collecting. In the whole time that we've been in business, which is going on 7 1/2 years now, I'd bet you I could count on one hand the accounts that went bad on us and didn't pay, and none of those were for significant dollars. Kim is very communicative when someone goes past terms; she has a very open dialogue with them. We work with our customers to try and help them get back in line because ultimately it's in our best interest for them to continue doing business with us. So she works really hard with that, and I don't want to make it sound like she's really heavy-handed, but there must be that impression out there because she does get good results."

Husband-and-wife operations are a backbone of the often family-run greenhouse industry, and many of

the businesses that Gene Batson has helped reflect that pattern. For Ned and Kim, Bradford's is more than just a business — it is the ultimate representation of synergistic management, founded on talent, mutual respect, and in this case — love.

According to Ned, the combination of personality traits that has contributed to their successful marriage has lent itself well to a successful business partnership.

"My wife and I have always been in love with each other; we

genuinely like each other, and I think there's a great deal of respect for each other's talent," he said emphatically. "My wife is very good at what she does, and I like to think that she thinks I'm good at what I do. We don't really butt ♦

grower success

heads; there's no winner or loser in a discussion. We don't always agree on things, but when we're done going through the list of arguments for or against taking one direction or another, we are generally in agreement by the time we get to the point where we're

making a decision. And neither one of us has a great deal of ego about whether it went the way one wanted it to go or the way the other person wanted it to go." This sort of give-and-take is crucial in any business relationship, allowing the operation to whirr along

with grace and speed rather than sputtering and clunking with resistance and inflexibility.

SUBSTANTIATED SERVICE

Besides internal cooperation, production skill and consistent



Bradford Botanicals produces finished foliage crops for greenhouse operations in the United States and Canada, brokers and long-haul truckers.

money flow, there's one more aspect of Bradford's operation that holds the separate success ingredients together: customer service. "I think one of the cornerstones of our business, and it's sort of a mantra that we all chant every day, is service," Ned explained. "I've always been of the philosophy that anybody who wants to can grow a nice, quality product. But when someone shops at our store, we want them to leave with the feeling that they got treated very well, and that everybody here bent over backwards to get them as much as they could, as quick as they could and the best that they could."

While many businesses often tout themselves as offering excellent customer service, what matters is whether or not their actions follow their claims. Ned substantiates Bradford's customer service philosophy by using the example of a long-haul driver customer from Texas who recently showed up with a full trailer and no room for his plant shipment. "Probably about one-third of our material should have been on that truck. My shipping supervisor got in there, unloaded the truck, put it back together and got everything on it. The driver of the truck sat in the office and talked with my sales staff while he did. So we really try to go the extra mile to help get things done — our customer in Texas was really glad that he didn't end up with one-third of his truck not used," he explained.

Like so many other sectors of the economy, the foliage business is slow right now. While Bradford's is no exception to this situation, with a solid background, polished mode of operations and true customer service, they stand a greater chance of weathering the storm and emerging strong. GPN

Brandi Danielle Thomas is associate editor of GPN.