

management

On the Road to a Greener Tomorrow

The 2008 winners of *GPN's* Sustainability Progress Awards are leading the charge down the path to a sustainable future.

By Paige Worthy
and Tim Hodson

Sustainability continues to be a hot button for this industry. Everybody talks about it, but what are growers actually doing to help make a difference in today's challenging business climate while preserving Earth's resources for future generations?

That is why *GPN* and OFA — an Association of Floriculture Professionals — created the 2008 Sustainability Progress Awards. We wanted to recognize those growers who have made significant progress toward making their businesses more sustainable.

We want to shine the spotlight on growers who have truly advanced their efforts toward sustainability in such areas as:

- Environmental sustainability
- Social and community sustainability
- Overall product integrity
- Economic sustainability

We received a wide variety of submissions this year, and the efforts described were all admirable. But in the end, two growers' entries really stood out: Pork & Plants in Altura, Minn., and Floral Plant Growers in Denmark, Wis.

These companies are great examples of how today's growers can meet their current business needs without compromising the ability of future generations.

Pork & Plants

Long before the mainstream's good intentions began to pave the way toward green in the 21st century, Pork & Plants, based in Altura, Minn., was already kicking up dust and blazing its own trail to sustainability.

Started in 1967 as a simple dairy-cow and hog farm, founders Edward and Joyce Kreidermacher soon began growing vegetables and a few flowers for themselves and some friends. After five years in business, word of mouth started to spread from friends and family to neighbors and people around town, and Joyce put up a lean-to alongside one of the hog barns to accommodate demand. Later, the fledgling business got its first real greenhouse, and by the mid-1980s they had become Pork & Plants. Ed and Joyce's son and daughter, Eric and Maria, have since taken the helm, but the company's green efforts began very early on.

Driving Change

As the original owners settled into their full-time role as growers, they installed an ebb-and-flow irrigation system to save on labor and fertilizer costs — a smart business strategy and an important first step in becoming more sustainable. The system was a customized setup with one reservoir tank but several benches, which allowed better control of fertilizer rates and contributed to a higher-quality crop, Maria writes in the company's Sustainability Progress Awards entry. Those quality crops obviously led to increased word of mouth and retail growth — meaning those benches were great for their business. But the ebb-and-flow installation also helped conserve water and prevent runoff, and that better crop quality meant they needed to use far fewer potentially harmful chemicals to prevent disease in the plants.

And that was just the beginning. The next step was incorporating renewable growing inputs, such as coir and parboiled rice hulls (PBH), in the mid-'90s, followed by a conversion to Western Pulp biodegradable pots for perennial and hanging-basket production in 1999. Since then, they've been experimenting with coir, chicken feathers, miscanthus and rice hulls to determine which work best for their business. In 2001, they installed a 65,000-gallon rainwater retention pond to reduce groundwater usage and constructed a 30,000-square-foot open-air greenhouse to reduce the facility's plant growth regulator, chemical and energy usage.

The most important step they've taken, Maria writes, is to provide heat through a renewable energy system. In 2003, they replaced their old forced-air heating systems with biomass boilers and radiant heat, and they use shelled corn and wooden pellets for fuel instead of gas, which has cut their energy costs in half. Following the construction of an on-site pelleting facility in the past year, they are now able to produce their own fuel — and sell it to other growers and farmers.

Moving Forward

"There are still other technologies we plan to explore, like wind turbines to provide our own energy," Maria writes. In 2007, they sowed native grasses on 30 acres of the farm; the perennial crop requires little upkeep and will prevent future problems with erosion. All the steps taken at Pork & Plants have smart economic and ecological ramifications; it's all part of the plan for this second-generation business. "Much of what we have implemented was done ahead of the curve, when it might not have seemed popular or cost-effective; however, we try to remain innovative and maintain our high quality while securing the future for our next generation."

Pork & Plants is living proof that working toward being more sustainable and remaining financially viable aren't mutually exclusive — the paths to each, especially in 2008, often merge. And when they do, it's truly the high road!

"Everything we've done over these 20-plus years demonstrates that a greenhouse of any size can be innovative and sustainable." ▶



Open-air greenhouse facilities have helped Pork & Plants reduce its energy usage in the past few years.

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Floral Plant Growers

Floral Plant Growers' journey to a sustainable future came about as the company was traveling down the path toward maximizing its revenue and profits. According to Floral Plant Growers' executive vice president and chief operating officer, Scott Lueder, the company was looking at ways to work smarter and more profitably and realized that many of its cost-reduction actions were also effective sustainability initiatives. The company has come to the realization that not only are sustainable practices good for the environment, they are good for the bottom line!

Some examples of Floral Plant Growers' smart business practices that turned into sustainability initiatives include replacing roof poly with the new high-efficiency roof poly (IR coating), which helped reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provided significant energy cost savings; ensuring that all carts and trucks are as full as possible, which helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions through fewer miles driven and reduced freight expense and fuel charges; and installing drip irrigation on an outdoor mum growing area, which helped reduce runoff, labor costs, fertilizer and chemical costs. The latter also reduces product shrink and improves product quality.

Sustaining the Environment

Earlier this year, the Denmark, Wis.-based grower obtained its Veri-

Flora sustainability certification for its Wisconsin location. All the plugs and perennial liners produced for the company's customers are covered under the sustainability certification Floral Plant Growers received on May 12, 2008. Certification also covers all bedding plants, mums, perennials and poinsettias produced in Wisconsin. The company is currently working to obtain certification for its Indiana and Iowa facilities.

By going through the VeriFlora certification process, the company was able to eliminate all EPA Class I "extremely hazardous" pesticide purchases and is in the process of finding replacements for EPA Class II pesticides, including "viable biological alternatives...wherever feasible."

Two years ago, Floral Plant Growers converted to a new roof poly with a special energy-saving coating (IR). Last year, the grower replaced 6 acres with the new energy efficient roof poly, reducing energy costs by nearly \$41,000 annually at its Wisconsin facility.

The company is also working to reduce its fuel and freight charges. They work diligently to ensure that all of their carts and shipping trucks are as full as possible, Lueder says. By using their trucks more efficiently, they are also reducing greenhouse emissions. This initiative began in 2007 and has already reduced freight expenses by more than \$390,000.

And last year, Floral Plant Growers



Floral Plant Growers tries to fill all its carts and trucks as full as possible to help reduce greenhouse emissions and save on freight costs.

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recycled more than 58,000 pounds of reusable plastics and continues to look for new avenues to help conserve resources.

Improving Product Integrity

The company continues to work on its quality initiatives to help reduce product shrink and drive profits, Lueder says. The company has implemented operational controls to identify "areas of concern during the production cycle."

According to Lueder, these monitoring and tracking activities help improve growing practices and produce reports that capture information during the busy production and shipping season for later resolution.

Floral Plant Growers also implemented lean enterprise practices last fall.

Giving Back

When it comes to social and community sustainability, Floral Plant Growers is an active participant. They host an annual poinsettia fundraiser for the local Lions Club, contribute plant material to the community for its beautification efforts and donate excess plug trays for use in the horticulture program at a local college.

Floral Plant Growers discovered it was on a journey toward a sustainable future as it was looking to improve its business operations. Lueder says the company continues to monitor and take corrective actions to eliminate wasteful expense activities while maximizing product quality. In the long term, it is looking for ways to use biofuels to replace fossil fuels to heat its greenhouses, minimize non-reusable plastic usage and improving our greenhouse turns, which will improve its profitability. **GPN**

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