

management

Raise the

Building a new greenhouse is full of challenges and — when done right — rewards. Retailer/grower/landscaper Mulhall's shares its journey from beginning to end.



Mulhall's has operated a retail center in Omaha, Neb., since 1974.

By Darhiana Mateo

The tagline "Mulhall's has it all!" is fitting for the Nebraska-based retailer/grower/landscaper. What began as a simple landscaping and lawn service business 52 years ago has evolved into a multifaceted player, offering today's busy customers a one-stop resource.

In this economy, it's hard enough being a successful grower. Or retailer. Or landscaper. Combining all three components successfully, as Mulhall's Landscaping, Nursery and Garden Center does, is a rare feat. The advantages are clear, says Juan Sio Guie, production supervisor and annuals head grower. For retailers, being able to grow your own product allows you to "grow it more cost effectively," provides "better control of your quality" and "allows you to engage more employees," Guie says.

Growers also can benefit from stepping into the retail side: "You deal with the customer on a day-to-day basis. You know what they want;

they tell you what they *don't* want. It allows you to cater directly to your market."

Evolving With the Times

Over time, Mulhall's — originally Mulhall's Landscaping and Lawn Service, specializing in production of trees, shrubs and perennials — evolved into a retail powerhouse. The company's 27-acre retail facility, based in their headquarters of Omaha, Neb., is a thriving and vital part of the company's success formula.

Today, the company's production operation spans about 400 acres throughout Omaha and surrounding towns. And with the construction of a new Nexus greenhouse in spring of '08, plans to continue expanding their production side are in full swing.

Venturing Into Annuals

Before Guie joined Mulhall's, the company had only dabbled in annuals, says Rachael Doolen, senior manager of green goods. But with Guie's expertise and enthusiasm, they slowly began experimenting with growing annuals within the

past few years. Promising results — they now grow a third of the annuals that they sell in the spring — combined with a seemingly strong annuals market convinced Mulhall's owners, brothers Dan and Sean Mulhall, that the time was ripe to build a new production greenhouse and give annuals a good try.

"It's a learning curve. We're in diapers when it comes to growing, specifically annuals," Guie says. "The main focus of our production had always been trees and shrubs."

Building the new dual-atrium twin-peak greenhouse, which sits on 29,000 square feet in nearby Gretna, Neb., was a labor of love that presented the Mulhall team with some unexpected hurdles. They started planning the greenhouse in January 2007 and did not finish until March 2008.

"We worked on designing this greenhouse for a whole year... Went around and around the idea," Guie says. "The general purpose is to be able to produce and grow specialty product that you wouldn't otherwise be able to get or it would be really expensive to get." ♦

EXPERT TIPS

Tom Tinsman, Nexus Greenhouse Corporation salesperson, offers the following advice to growers planning on building a new greenhouse:

Reach out to local experts. These days, it's almost impossible for growers to do it all on their own, Tinsman says. And because building department regulations and procedures can vary widely by area, an experienced architect or contractor familiar with your area should be involved from the start. "It's very helpful to have someone you trust locally who has worked with building departments to help dovetail all the things you need to do."

Get finances in order. Before you can move forward with any plans, make sure you "have your banks in line," Tinsman says.

Ask around. Your peers can be your greatest resources. "When I'm working with someone who is new at it, I have them call one or several of my customers just to have them talk it out amongst themselves," Tinsman says. "Just about everyone who goes through the process will say at the end, 'If only I knew this then...'. The challenge is to make customers as educated as possible."



Construction of the new production greenhouse in Gretna, Neb., began in fall 2007. Tentative plans are to make the greenhouse more "retail friendly" in the future.

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TIMELINE OF A BUILD-OUT

January 2007: First formal meeting with company owners and staff to discuss key points, such as what type of greenhouse was needed and what type of heating was required and available.

JANUARY 2007



January – August: Worked on grading site. Worked out building details such as general layout; decided on appropriate zoning for the heating system, ventilation, irrigation systems and environmental control systems.

August: Opted for a closed-loop hot water system and chose DeltaT as the supplier. Key staff traveled to Utah to visit several Nexus greenhouses. Soon after, they signed with Nexus and ordered columns.

AUGUST



October: Installed columns.

SEPTEMBER

September: Columns delivered toward the end of the month. Staff worked on getting the contractors and utilities permits lined up, from power and gas to concrete and plumbing.

OCTOBER

Mid-October: Drainage systems and restroom plumbing installed.

Late October: Began prep work for the floor heating system (insulation, wire mesh, etc.)



Step by Step

The first step was narrowing down the design: What type of greenhouse would best suit their needs? After exploring several different options, they settled on Nexus' dual-atrium style. Its main selling point was environmental control features that give growers greater control, simulating appropriate outdoor-like growing conditions while offering protection from inclement weather.

"In Nebraska, we have very extreme weather; our summers are really hot, and our winters are really cold," he says. "When you have a better

control of the environment, you are also able to turn a better product."

Next came important deliberations such as determining what heating system would best meet their needs and budget, figuring out zoning issues, and lining up contractors and permits for utilities installations. Through it all, adaptability was key. "Make sure the design allows you flexibility down the road," Guie advises.

Construction Challenges

After the crucial planning and deliberation stage, actual construction began in fall 2007 with

the installation of the columns. The decision to begin construction late in the year, combined with an extremely harsh Nebraska winter — complete with ice storms — set the stage for a challenging and drawn-out build-out process. Because Mulhall's supplied most of the labor to build the greenhouse from its own employee base, they hoped to have more employees available in the winter to help than in busier seasons. "It's really challenging to make sure that everyone is on time with their duties to move forward," Guie says. "When you have the weather against you on top of that, there's only so much you can do."

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November: Heating system installed and concrete poured. Weather problems began, which made scheduling and pouring of concrete difficult. While the concrete was being poured in one bay, the floor heat was installed in the next one.

December 2007 – January 2008: The weather was particularly cold with several ice/snow storms, which made work challenging and sometimes slow.

March: Worked on details (paint, electrical, etc.) as well as getting the state fire and electrical requirements worked out for approval.

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

JANUARY 2008

FEBRUARY

MARCH

APRIL

Late November: Received rest of the greenhouse steel and began installation. Besides a head builder, Mulhall's supplied rest of the labor force.



February: Installed irrigation booms and hanging basket system from Cherry Creek Systems. Argus Environmental Control System, unit heaters and electrical wiring also were installed.

April: Started potting operation in the new greenhouses.



The challenging weather delayed the construction phase and ultimately led to late spring crops. Growers planning to build a new greenhouse should carefully weigh what time of the year they will dedicate for construction and plan for the unexpected, he advises.

Another hurdle Mulhall's experienced during the build-out involved getting state inspectors out later in the game than they should have. It's crucial that growers get them in the loop from the beginning, Guie says. "If you're proactive about it and establish a good relationship, that will help you down the road."

Pushing Forward

The road might have been rocky, but the end result was well worth the effort, Guie says. "The late spring and summer annuals crop grown in the new greenhouses turned out to be some of the best-quality crops we've grown," he says. In fact, the company experienced a boost in sales in 2008 compared to the previous year.

The greenhouse and irrigation systems allow Mulhall's to grow healthier plants as well as grow their bottom line. "Overall, the result is a more [environmentally and economically] sustainable operation," he says. Ultimately, what the

new greenhouse provided the grower/retailer is priceless: "The confidence to stand behind the quality of our product and know that customer is going to come back." **GPN**

Darhiana Mateo is associate editor of GPN. She can be reached at (847) 391-1013 or dmateo@sgcmail.com.

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