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Small Steps to Sustainability

By Jasmina Radjevic

A more sustainable future doesn't have to come through sweeping operational overhauls. With that in mind, 2009 *GPN/OFA* Sustainability Progress Award winner **Van Wingerden Greenhouses** has made precise business tweaks and a world of difference.

Van Wingerden Greenhouses, whose facility includes a young plant division, finished division and a retail garden center, has made great efforts to be more sustainable.

GPN, in conjunction with OFA — an Association of Horticulture Professionals — had the opportunity to honor this year's Sustainability Progress Award winner at July's OFA Short Course in Columbus, Ohio. Van Wingerden Greenhouses in Blaine, Wash., earned this award for their continual efforts toward a sustainable future.



When John Burns, head grower, submitted the entry for Van Wingerden Greenhouses, our judging panel was extremely impressed with the company's endeavors.

Van Wingerden Greenhouses' more than 10-acre facility houses a young plant division, finished division and an independent retail garden center. The young plant division grows plugs and liners for Ball Seed, Ball FloraPlant and Selecta First Class. The finished division grows bedding

plants and pot crops for Lowe's and Safeway, along with numerous customers throughout the Pacific Northwest.

In 2009, Van Wingerden Greenhouses received VeriFlora certification, which recognizes the company's vision and efforts to be more sustainable. The company has only recently undertaken efforts to be recognized as a sustainable company but, according to Burns, has always carried core values that hold true to sustainability.

"We have chosen to go the sustainable route because for the most part it makes economical sense," says owner Mike Van Wingerden. "Some of the benefits of becoming more sustainable have been cost savings, the quality of the products the company produces and the quality of the work environment."

Employees: Van Wingerden's Greatest Asset

At Van Wingerden, quality of life is not only important. It's the backbone of the company.



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Van Wingerden purchased a wood pellet boiler to create an alternative energy source to fossil fuel, reducing dependence and saving money at the same time.

Mike Van Wingerden applies the Golden Rule to his employees. This thinking, although very simple, has resonated through the company and has created a very sustainable work environment.

Burns says employees at Van Wingerden Greenhouses are proud of their work and this is reflected in the quality of the product they produce. Employees know that family comes first, and life outside the greenhouse is more important. Therefore, employees work long and hard while they're at work and are paid overtime. The company's greatest asset is its employees, and it's the employees

"From a sustainability point of view, by doing all these things we are less wasteful, more automated and save money."

Mike Van Wingerden

that help keep the business sustainable.

Building Blocks: Structure and Automation

The company continually strives for quality product as well as cost savings. Van Wingerden has invested heavily in greenhouse automation to achieve these goals. They have glass Venlo and open-roof ranges that provide ideal environments for plant growth. The ranges are equipped with shade and energy curtains that aid in fuel savings. Irrigation is managed through drip, echo conveyors, booms and flood floors. All of these processes cut down on cost, water,



Open-roof ranges, equipped with shade and energy curtains, provide ideal environments for plant growth and aid in fuel savings.

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fertilizer use and disease.

The greenhouses are operated by Argus control systems, which provide ideal conditions for plant growth and save on labor and energy. Quality checks have been implemented in the life of the crops, starting with germination and continuing all the way to finished sales. These checks, along with good growing practices and ideal environments, have created quality sustainable products that the company can stand behind.

Recent Developments in Production

As Van Wingerden Greenhouses continues to grow, the vision of sustainable production drives purchasing decisions. The company recently switched to alternative fuel by purchasing a wood pellet boiler. This has fostered major fuel savings and lowered dependence on fossil fuels.

They have adopted a biological pest program that has been extremely successful. This helps cut down on pesticides and makes for a safer environment inside and outside the company. Van Wingerden is planning on adopting an intensive production protocol in the near future to aid in its rapid growth.

In 2008, Van Wingerden's poinsettia crop was grown entirely

with no fungicides or insecticides. The product Rootshield was incorporated into the soil to protect from root pathogens. The crop was protected from pests such as thrips, fungus gnats and whitefly using a combination of predatory mites and parasitic wasps. The program's success is due in part to the rigorous scouting the company is performing.

This year, the company implemented the use of barley and pepper banker plants around the greenhouses to ensure high amounts of beneficial insects were available to target greenhouse pests such as aphids and thrips. There has been some success with this system, and the company looks forward to the future of this program. It has enabled Van Wingerden Greenhouses to dispose of many types of broad-spectrum pesticides and cut down the amount of chemicals purchased. The biological insects help create a safer work environment for its employees, less pesticide discharge to its surrounding environment and a more sustainable product that the company can stand behind with confidence.

The company also has built two 1-million-gallon retention ponds that hold all the rain water it catches off its 10-acre facility. This allows the company to use very clean water 10 of the 12 months of

the year. Burnes says this has been great for crop quality and a good use for the water that would otherwise be diverted into runoff.

These are the main initiatives Van Wingerden Greenhouses has done or is doing not only to be sustainable but also to do the right thing.

"From a sustainability point of view, by doing all these things we are less wasteful, more automated and save money," explains Van Wingerden. "In turn, our overall products and company become more sustainable due to the cost savings."

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Van Wingerden Greenhouses has adopted a biological pest program to help cut down pesticide use.

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