management

# Small Steps to Sustainability

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. *PN*, 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 sus-

tainable future. When John Burns, head grower, submitted the entry for Van Wingerden Greenhouses, ourjudging 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

# By Jasmina Radjevic

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.

"From a

sustainability

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

Burns says employees at Van Wingerden automated and Greenhouses are proud save money." of their work and this is reflected in the quality Mike Van Wingerden 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 that help keep the business sustainable.

**Building Blocks:** Structure and Automation The company contin-

doing all these things we are less ually strives for quality product as well as cost wasteful, more 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





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.

mented the use of barley and pepper

banker plants around the green-

houses 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 Green-

houses 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 environ-

ment for its employees, less pesti-

cide discharge to its surrounding

environment and a more sustain-

able product that the company can

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 company also has built two

stand behind with confidence.

accor-great for crop quality and a goodotectuse for the water that would other-wise be diverted into runoff.h asThese are the main initiativesteflyVan 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

the year. Burnes says this has been

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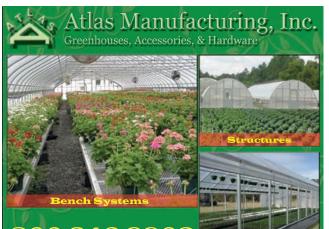
van Wingerden Greenhouses has adopted a biological pest program to help cut down pesticide use.

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