

Problem:

Plantpeddler signed on for a new partnership, resulting in higher demand for quality product despite a small workforce in rural Cresco, Iowa.

Solution:

A new facility was built with top-of-the-line automation to produce greater efficiency and higher-quality product.

Where are they now?

The industry called them crazy, but Mike and Rachel Gooder made good on their “risky” Plantpeddler investment.

By Carrie Burns

One year, three million dollars and 10 full runs later, Plantpeddler in Cresco, Iowa, is growing as fast as you can say “more acreage.” Mike and Rachel Gooder opened the doors to their new facility, Plantpeddler Young Plants, on January 10, 2002. So, how has the last year been? “I can put it in simple terms: The investors are happy; and we are on target with the business plan projections,” says Mike.

WHY THE NEW FACILITY?

Plantpeddler began a relationship with Dummen Germany about four years ago, and formed a partnership two years ago. “Plantpeddler Young Plants is the direct result of a need for a high-profile, state-of-the-art rooting facility to enhance the success of our joint venture partnership in Dummen USA,” says Mike. “So the project was really driven by a need for a world-class rooting facility.”

As we all know, nothing turns out the way we want it to without planning. Mike and Rachel began planning the project a little over two years before actually breaking ground. Plantpeddler started assembling a team and taking input from all facets of the industry — investigating facilities, visiting facilities, meeting with various vendors of hard materials, looking at operations both in the United States and Europe. The first step was defining the goals of the facility and making sure all of the team members had a good understanding of how to achieve this level of performance.



Rachel and Mike Gooder

ADVANCED AUTOMATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The 2-acre facility hosts a huge headhouse with the best automation possible — advanced sticking lines, automated bench loading, continuous flow bench washer, linear robot and irrigation control center. Mike researched his options and came up with a pretty good mix.

While some of the components for the facility were old, the team found that others would be best new. The team had developed very sophisticated logarithms for the production of rooted liners using environmental controls and stationary mist lines, and when they considered the new facility, they knew they had to use booms to facilitate the watering. But as they researched more, they decided to try something new. “We were shocked to discover booms had no intelligence on board. ♦



Plantpeddler's 2-acre facility is loaded with automation, including sticking lines, automated bench loading, continuous flow bench washer and an irrigation control center.

Booms never looked at environmental data to make decisions, only glorified time clock control. To ensure plant quality production, you need an environmental computer analyzing data inputs and making smart decisions,”

Mike says. “So, we challenged the boom companies to link our environmental computer to the booms. To our knowledge, Plantpeddler Young Plants was the first facility with this level of integration accomplished in the world.”

Plantpeddler invested one-third of its money up-front in the automation material-handling side of the project because building a facility that was inadequately automated would result in the staff learning bad habits. Trying to re-

train them at a later point would result in wasted time and effort.

“We have a belief as a company about investing in automation early, so that you immediately reap the rewards.”

That kind of mentality is what makes Plantpeddler so successful. That and Mike and Rachel’s determination to see everything. Mike is constantly traveling in and outside the United States to other growers and trade shows. And sometimes Plantpeddler even looks outside the industry for ideas. The company is testing a packaging system that will load all master cartons, improving the efficiency of the packaging line. “I’ve been in tons of greenhouses, and maybe one or two percent have any type of packing line automated with taping machines, so why don’t we use standard efficiencies that are used by other industries?” Plantpeddler believes in applying concepts and solutions used by other industries to solve horticultural problems.

THE LAST YEAR

“When we compare actual performance numbers at

Guide to the inside

Here are some of the products you’ll find at Plantpeddler Young Plants.

Irrigation, Heating and Cooling and Environmental Controls:

- TrueLeaf’s BioTherm and GreenLink divisions
- Argus Controls
- American Cool
- Aero-Tech
- Holland Heater

Structures:

- Nexus
- Varco Pruden

Automation:

- Hawe
- Visser
- Cherry Creek
- Ellegard

Coverings and Curtain Materials:

- Green-Tek
- Wadsworth – curtain drive system
- LS Svensson

Lighting:

- P & L Lights

Software:

- Innovative Software Solutions

grower success

Plantpeddler Young Plants to our partner, Dummen Germany — we have very similar products, of course the same genetics, similar propagation systems — we do a fantastic job on all of our costs,” says Mike. “Due to the investment in

initial infrastructure (including automation) our depreciation is higher, but we can stick faster, yield a higher percentage at harvest and ship more efficiently. Our challenge is to grow the facility, as the next step brings costs into balance.”



Things have been going so well for Plantpeddler- Dummen USA that the team can’t believe it’s been only a year. “We look back a year ago in January when we were hosting the industry open house; we ran our first crop of geraniums through. Coming around full-circle, we’re confident coming into this spring,” Mike says.

Plantpeddler’s competition for liner production comes internationally, from places such as Canada and potentially South America. “It is time for American growers to take responsibility for our destiny. We can build a facility that produces a high-quality crop, but it must compete with international pricing. That is essential in the next 5-10 years. To do that, you must decrease labor and material inputs while increasing product quality. In the end, low-cost providers will win.”

FUTURE PLANS

Plantpeddler Young Plants is constantly looking toward the future, and building relationships is key. “We select vendor relationships based on common, long-term objectives and philosophies. Once partnering with a supplier, we believe in building a bridge that strengthens both parties,” says Mike.

The 1-year-old facility is step one of phase one. Each of the three phases is a 5-acre production block with a headhouse. “As we prepare to build again, we will re-evaluate everything involved and say, ‘Did it work? Why or why not?’ That evaluation process is going on now. One year in operation, we are now analyzing data collected to determine the level of performance and if it met the projections within the facility design.” So it is just about certain that the next two phases will be as smooth as the first if not smoother. [GPN](#)

Carrie Burns is associate editor of GPN.