



# Staying on the FOREFRONT

Creating and nurturing long-lasting relationships, along with an emphasis on high product quality and outstanding customer service, keeps ForemostCo on the forefront of the young plant industry.

## FOREMOSTCO AT A GLANCE:

### CEO:

Joseph Roberts VIII

### COO:

Joseph Roberts IX

### Year Founded:

1987

### Locations:

Miami and Winter Garden, Florida,  
Costa Rica and Guatemala

### Total Growing Space:

46 acres in Florida; 135 acres in Costa Rica;  
and 28 acres in Guatemala

### Number of Employees:

Approximately 375 across all locations –  
85 in the U.S. All of the company's employees  
are full-time and work year-round.

### Customers:

"Approximately 1,200 of the largest  
and best growers in the world,"  
CEO Joe Roberts declares.

### Website:

[www.foremostco.com](http://www.foremostco.com)

## BY TIM HODSON

Since 1987, Joe Roberts has been a man on a mission. The CEO and founder of ForemostCo Inc., in Miami, Florida, has continually adapted his company and its business to provide high-quality products and superb customer service to the grower community.

By owning its own production facilities and maintaining strong, long-term relationships with both customers and suppliers, ForemostCo continues to meet the ever-changing needs of the market.

### THE EARLY YEARS

ForemostCo was founded as Foremost Foliage in 1987 when timber giant Weyerhaeuser, Inc. closed down its plant brokerage company, Shemin International.

Joe Roberts had spent several years at Shemin helping to build the young plants brokerage company. But when the management team at Weyerhaeuser realized that the tropical young plants business didn't really fit into the company's plans, Roberts (with Weyerhaeuser's blessing) put together a team and created Foremost Foliage.

Today, ForemostCo provides cuttings and liners to wholesale growers and sources its material from around the world including the Far East, Europe and North, Central and South America.

The company provides growers with year-round availability of rooted and unrooted cuttings, vegetative

and tissue cultured liners, air-layered plants, seeds, bulbs, canes and rhizomes.

ForemostCo has two facilities in Florida. Its primary office in Miami is where the shipping and logistics, purchasing, and back office operations are coordinated by Randy Goff and Leo Hernandez.

Winter Garden, Florida, is the home of ForemostCo's second office as well as one of its daughter companies, Phoenix Foliage, which David Kirwan has run for over 25 years. Rolando Mejia leads the team at the Costa Rican facility, and in Guatemala Luis Pacheco continues to grow ForemostCo's newest nursery, Vita Farms.

### IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Over the past 28+ years, Roberts and his team have continually grown the company by cultivating and nurturing relationships with its customers as well as its suppliers.

Roberts says the company prides itself on developing these relationships with its customers and suppliers by delivering consistent quality and exceptional service.

"We have a lot of relationships that go way back," Roberts says. "The really good relationships are the ones that build over time where we can better learn and understand [the customer's] needs and then work to satisfy those needs."

Roberts says everyone benefits by creating these custom-built relationships. "We really focus on the relationships more than the plants. The plants are the outcome, perhaps, but the relationship and that deep



*(Top) ForemostCo's daughter company, Vita Farms LLC in Guatemala, produces a wide variety of succulents. (Center and Bottom) The company's shipping and logistics department has an outstanding track record and has never missed a week of shipping in its 28-year history.*

understanding of our stakeholders is where the real value is created."

He believes there are three sides to every relationship—the customers, the suppliers and the team at ForemostCo, "and it only works if all three parties benefit. Otherwise, there is no future."

He says it has to be worth each party's time and money to participate and come out ahead; if they don't then there is no point to invest in the relationship.

ForemostCo deals with growers of all shapes and sizes, but Roberts says a "typical customer" is a fairly large grower that produces a broad assortment of products that his company supplies. "It is someone we can provide real value to and who will appreciate it, such that we can build a mutually profitable and long-lasting relationship."

"The ideal customer is someone we get to know and they get to know us, and we become valuable to each other. Those are certainly the most fulfilling customers and it's nice to put a smile on their faces."

As a young plant supplier, ForemostCo also relies on its relationships with its breeder partners to help deliver the products that growers want and need to supply to consumers.

"There are a number of breeders and breeder reps whom we have good and long-standing relationships with," Roberts says.

And in a market that continues to consolidate, these relationships "really do become more and more relevant and valuable. [They] are an integral part of who we are and the success we have enjoyed."

## STAYING FOCUSED

Over the years, Roberts has been willing to try other different plant-related businesses like a cut flower importing and distribution company or a finished plant division for companies that sold to the chain stores.

He said those types of businesses all have their own different sets of challenges and can be rather thankless. "We came to a point where we decided [those types of businesses] were not for us."

He wanted to concentrate on the young plant business. So back in the 1990s that's what happened and the name of the company was changed from Foremost Foliage to ForemostCo.

ForemostCo expanded its product offerings to growers and that became the company's core business. "We wanted to focus the business on working with growers. When you work with growers, you actually get a 'Thank You!' from them. You get to walk through their nursery and see that you have been a part of their success too."

## TUNED INTO TECHNOLOGY

Thanks to a background in engineering, Roberts is a big fan of technology. The company was a very early adopter of "e-mail" back in the late 1980s and created its first website in the early 1990s before a lot of other companies even had computers.

"We are very integrated. We have relied on technology a great deal and that has helped us keep our costs in check," he remarks. "Like everyone else, we have had to find ways to become more efficient and more effective and technology has been a big part of that."

Roberts says the company has made a major commitment to information technology. "From the beginning, we have put a lot of energy, faith and resources into IT and to this day, we continue to do that. Everybody is online in our system."

With facilities in the United States, Costa Rica and Guatemala, communication is critical so ForemostCo uses a VOIP (voice over Internet protocol) system.

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## THE NEXT GENERATION AT FOREMOSTCO

For nearly 30 years, Joseph C. Roberts VIII has been running tropical young plant supplier ForemostCo. Sometime in the future, that will be the job of Joseph C. Roberts IX.

While company founder and CEO has no immediate plans to retire, he knows that day will come eventually. And when it does, he wants to be sure the company continues to be successful.

Joe knows that for ForemostCo to flourish in the future, they need to continually “bring in young people with energy and a different view and a fresh perspective” rather than just doing things the same way they have been doing them for the past 28 years. One of those people is his son, Joseph.

When Joseph was in high school, “I was hauling boxes for my father in the warehouse on the weekends.” But he really didn’t know if he would have a career in the young plant business.

When it came time to go to college, Joseph wanted to explore his options outside of Florida so he enrolled at Virginia Tech University and graduated with a double major in political science and psychology. After graduation from VTU, he attended the University of Miami School of Law where he got his law degree.

After a year or so of working in civil litigation, Joseph went to work for an engineering firm where he worked on the firm’s contracts and the bidding process for projects.

While he enjoyed his job, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to make that his lifelong career. “I knew I wanted to travel and do something that was productive and creative and make a contribution.”

He realized that he could do many of those things at the company that his father developed. “I would get to travel a bit. There would be a little adventure and there was a product that we were contributing to the world to make it a greener place.”

So about seven years ago, after much discussion with his father, he became a ForemostCo employee.

At first, he was doing some of the company’s legal work like reviewing contracts and agreements. Eventually he began to learn about other aspects of the business and gaining a deeper understanding of the products and the entire process as well as ForemostCo’s position in the industry.

Today, Joseph is responsible for a sales territory and still works with many of the company’s contracts, while continuing to learn about the production facilities and their products, developing vendor relationships and getting an overall view of how the company operates. And he constantly talks to his father all the time about **all** aspects of the business.

“They’ve had no problems throwing me in the deep end,” he jokes, “but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Joe knows there are exciting times ahead for his son and the company. “One of the biggest mistakes I could make is to tell Joseph which direction I think the company should go in. I really believe it is going to be up to him and his team to figure it out.”

“I have been fortunate to surround myself and work with some really, really good people who are very passionate and committed,” the senior Roberts says. “He will need to do the same thing [in the future]. I can help him, but he is going to have to figure it out.”

That is something Joseph is looking forward to in the years ahead. He knows that he is going to have to continue to explore new products lines and cultivate existing relationships with customers and suppliers while, at the same time, looking to develop new ones.

“We are going to continue to find new opportunities” like the companies line of perennials or its color program. “It’s all about teaming up with good people who complement what you do.”





*(Top) ForemostCo CEO Joe Roberts credits much of the company's success to the people. (Center) Consistent product quality and reliability have helped the company build and maintain long-term relationships. (Bottom) OSV in Costa Rica uses environmentally friendly growing methods to protect the health of the employees, local residents and the ecosystem.*

That way anyone can communicate with someone else at a different facility just by picking up the phone and dialing their extension. The company also does a lot of video conferencing with the different locations to make sure everyone is on the same page at the same time Roberts remarks.

"But having said all of that, there is nothing like face time with each other. So we try to travel a lot to each of the locations and spend time with the teams there."

And technology is also what helps ensure that ForemostCo's customers receive their orders in the fastest and most cost-effective manner with its "fluid, integrated logistics operation."

"We put a lot of time and energy into minimizing logistics costs and maximizing the effectiveness of it."

Roberts says the ForemostCo's logistics team headed up by company veteran Leo Hernandez is dedicated to delivering the freshest product possible and is continually looking for the best ways to get plants from around the world into its customers' greenhouses.

And in the 28 years ForemostCo has been in business, Roberts says they have never missed a week of shipping.

### THE MVPs

Roberts says the biggest asset of the company is not the plants — it's the people! "What they know, who they know and, most importantly, the care and passion they bring to bear," have helped make the company what it is.

"We do produce plants and we physically move plants, but at the end of the day, it is all about the people giving the process and the outcome the care that is needed," Roberts states.

He estimates that the median tenure of the employees is around 20 years. "When we hire people, we hire them to stay," remarks Roberts. Because of the nature of the company's products and the locations, ForemostCo does not have any seasonal employees.

Roberts is very proud of the culturally diverse team that they have put together at all of the ForemostCo facilities. With employees in the United States, Costa Rica and Guatemala, "it is important that we all connect at the human level. The people that work here are very passionate and we are all accountable to each other. That is really the flavor we try to maintain at the company."

### ALWAYS BE PREPARED

Over the years, Roberts has seen a lot of changes in the plant industry as well as at ForemostCo. The philosophy is to be as proactive as possible. Even when the economy goes through its ups and downs, Roberts and his team are always working on their plan to build a stronger business.

Over the years, "We have probably put more emphasis on infrastructure than we needed to and put more emphasis on the future than on the everyday things," Roberts says. Most of the day-to-day things can be handled fairly easy if you work smart and plan properly. He said that kind of planning rather than just cost cutting is what helped them build themselves out of tough times.

Roberts also sees a bright future ahead. "It is a dynamic industry. Like all of us, we need to be sure we remain relevant to our stakeholders," Roberts states.

As the industry continues to consolidate, growers will need to find the right alternatives and ForemostCo is ready to "provide the products and the service — the whole package — that helps differentiate us in a positive way!" ■

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