

# WHERE HORTICULTURE MEETS ECOLOGY

North Creek Nurseries has earned a reputation for preserving habitats and nurturing ecosystems through its biodiverse product offering.

BY JASMINA DOLCE

**W**e have featured a lot of growing operations in Big Grower, and I think it's safe to say that many, if not most, of our stories tend to focus on growers that began as small mom-and-pop operations that continuously grew and transformed over the years, while being passed down from generation to generation — growers that had various ups and downs and had to make adjustments to remain competitive in the market.

But this month's featured grower tells a much different story. North Creek Nurseries is a 28-year-old company that has remained successful in its target markets throughout the years, so successful that their product offering has really never changed. North Creek Nurseries does not follow trends, they lead them. From natives to pollinators to sustainability, and all the other buzzwords in between, North Creek has remained ahead of the curve since its inception.

## A SHARED VISION

North Creek Nurseries was founded in 1988 by Steve Castorani, president and CEO, and Dale Hendricks. Castorani, at the time, was working as a landscape contractor and had recently opened a garden center. Hendricks came from a perennial propagation background, most recently working with Green Leaf Nursery.

Hendricks approached Castorani about going into business together and coincidentally Castorani had just purchased a 17-acre farm in Landenberg, Pennsylvania. He didn't know it at the time, but this purchase would soon become the home of their joint venture.



## NORTH CREEK NURSERIES AT A GLANCE

**Year founded:**  
1988

**Locations:**  
Two facilities in Pennsylvania: Landenberg and Oxford

**Key personnel:**  
Steve Castorani, president and CEO; Tim McGinty, general manager and COO; Rob McHale, sales manager; Angela Clelan, customer service manager; Claudia West, ecological sales manager and Nikki Drake, financial administrator

**Total growing space:**  
45 acres

**Customers:**  
Wholesale growers and landscape architects, designers, contractors and municipalities

**Number of employees:**  
84 (82 full-time and two part-time)

**Website:**  
[www.northcreeknurseries.com](http://www.northcreeknurseries.com)



*The American Beauties Native Plants brand began as a partnership between North Creek Nurseries and Prides Corner Farms. It is now available from six licensed growers throughout the country.*



*North Creek Nurseries has more than 3 acres of trial gardens. Customers are welcome to tour the gardens through the summer and fall.*

Neither Castorani nor Hendricks wanted to start a traditional nursery. “We found that we had a very common bond in ecological landscaping,” Castorani says. “And so a lot of our conversations revolved around what types of plants we would grow. The term hadn’t been coined yet, but eventually we likened it to providing ecosystem services.”

“We had a tendency to seek out native plants and native plant cultivars. Dale had a passion for finding great plants, and he was a fantastic plant propagator,” says Castorani. While Hendricks has since left the business, the original vision continues. Back then and still today, North Creek Nurseries specializes in growing starter plugs of perennials, grasses, ferns, vines and shrubs.

“Our plant palette is heavily weighted towards Eastern U.S. natives,” adds Castorani. “As it turns out, our slogan still stands true today: where horticulture meets ecology. This mantra guides our core principles and we use it as an internal filter — a common theme that we can count on to bring us back to center when needed.”

Our living laboratory is comprised of gardens that have ecological value and aesthetic sway.

#### **EXPANSION AMID A RECESSION**

One of the first major expansions North Creek Nurseries made was in 1999 when a second farm in Oxford, Pennsylvania was purchased. This additional location now serves as a growing and shipping facility.

In the early part of the most recent recession, North Creek knew it was time to make some changes to its processes. “Instead of getting bigger, we looked at our Oxford location and reorganized our shipping department,” says Castorani. “Not necessarily making it bigger, but more efficient through lean manufacturing principles.”

North Creek’s most recent expansion came as the economy rebounded. While the company had been serving the landscape market with its LP32 and LP50 Landscape Plugs for several years by then, they saw a notable increase in that market segment through the early part of the recession.

“We saw a substantial rise in demand for North Creek product going into the landscape sector when our core business, the growing business, was becoming saturated. Consumers weren’t buying as many plants,” shares Castorani. “A lot of our plants then went into infrastructure work, and it was helpful to have that diversity.”

#### **PUTTING PLANTS TO THE TEST**

One very large element of their business model, that may set North Creek Nurseries apart, is its trial gardens. “We have over 3 acres of trial and demonstration gardens. In addition to partnering with regional institutes and universities, we perform and gather a majority of our research here,” says Castorani. “Our living laboratory is comprised of gardens that have ecological value and aesthetic sway — rain gardens, constructed wetlands, meadows, green roofs, living walls, and side-by-side comparative shade and sun trials.”

“We open up the gardens throughout the summer and the fall,” says Carrie Wiles, marketing manager.



*Not only is North Creek Nurseries neonicotinoid free, but the company also has 30 bee hives on the property.*

through sales of the brand, they raise money for partners such as National Wildlife Federation and Pollinator Partnership, and other organizations that promote native plants, natural habitats and biodiversity.

The brand now has six growers across the country growing American Beauties Native Plants: Carolina Native Nursery (Burnsville, North Carolina), Civano Nursery (Tucson, Arizona), Garden Crossing (Zeeland, Michigan), Midwest Groundcovers (St. Charles, Illinois), Prides Corner Farms (Lebanon, Connecticut) and Willoway Nurseries (Avon, Ohio).

"It was difficult launching a brand, especially in the early years," says Castorani. "We launched the brand in the beginning of the recession, and it was not an easy thing to pull off, especially when nursery sales were down."

The new project took time and investment, but North Creek Nurseries and Prides Corner Farms persevered. "It's been very successful," says Castorani. "And we're making an impact on the market."

"We've been able to hire a brand manager [Peggy Ann Montgomery] and she's done really well supporting our network of growers. We have a fantastic website [www.abnativeplants.com]. It gives consumers and growers lots of information about native plants and their relevance."

While American Beauties Native Plants doesn't advertise direct to consumers, they were able to promote their brand through a promotion in Country Garden magazine, which has gained a ton of traction especially on social media.

"We held a contest where couples wrote letters about why they should be the award recipient, and we gave the winner a regionally appropriate native landscape valued at \$7,500," says Castorani. Country Garden magazine then wrote an article about the contest winners and included photos of the landscape installation.

Garden writers and bloggers have also helped promote the brand. "We work closely with the Garden Writers Association, and Peggy Ann Montgomery, our brand manager, recently went to a bloggers convention," says Castorani.

Their guerrilla marketing strategy has worked out well for the brand, says Castorani. "Plus the National Wildlife Federation and Pollinator Partnership, along with others we partner with co-promote the brand."

### **SPEAKING OF POLLINATORS ...**

As a propagator specializing in and passionate about providing sustainable outdoor environments, one of North Creek Nurseries most important efforts is to be a pollinator-friendly grower.

The company has long been neonicotinoid free, long before neonicotinoids were even really being used in greenhouses.

"In the early 2000s, we made a conscious decision that we can't sell plants that have chemical residue on them that are harmful to insects that would feed on them," says Castorani.

It was a natural move for North Creek, but definitely not an easy one. "It's been a learning curve for all of us, and it is very challenging," shares Castorani. "We had to do a lot of internal R&D on how to work in a more chemically friendly environment by using beneficial insects and soft chemistry."

North Creek Nurseries has made pollinator health an enormous priority and recently partnered with local beekeeper, Walt Broughton. "We have 30 of Walt's hives on our farm and over 1.2 million bees on the property," says Castorani. "We have 1.2 million little workers out there enjoying our trial gardens." ■



### **DID YOU KNOW...**

Forty of North Creek Nurseries' 84 employees are under the age of 40. And two of those employees have recently been recognized as part of GPN's 40 Under 40 — Ryan McGinty, farm manager (Oxford facility), and Erin Kelly, production manager.

"We have a very young workforce," says Castorani. "It's a challenge to keep providing education and training for them, but it's something we believe in. It's a challenge but a good challenge, something we have to keep on our forefront."

"All customers are welcome to visit and learn. Guests can go through the gardens on their own via a self-guided tour, or we can give an extensive tour of how we manage the land that directly influences our business practices and decisions."

Trialing plant performance is serious business at North Creek Nurseries. The company's research and development department recently underwent expansion to grow its trialing process.

"Typically a plant stays in the trial process for a minimum of three years before we consider adding it to our product mix," shares Wiles. "In this time period, we're really able to understand how plants perform over several seasons. Also, in that time, we're performing market research and customer evaluations."

### **CREATING AN ECO-FRIENDLY BRAND**

Being a specialist in natives and plants that thrive in ecosystems, it was a natural move for North Creek to develop a brand focused on the category. About ten years ago, before "natives" became the buzzword that it is now, Mark Sellev of Prides Corner Farms approached Castorani about launching a native plant brand.

"He kind of challenged me," shares Castorani. "He said, 'You are the native plant guys and if you don't come up with a native plant brand and a cause-marketing partner, I'm going to do it myself.'"

So North Creek Nurseries partnered with Prides Corner Farms to create American Beauties Native Plants, a brand dedicated to offering garden centers, landscapers and gardeners plants that will bring life to gardens. And