



Growing from Generation to Generation

Pleasant View Gardens continues to grow and be successful by always focusing on the ultimate success of its customer.

BY TIM HODSON

Over the past 41 years, the Huntington family has grown Pleasant View Gardens from a small regional foliage producer to a major national young plant producer and finished grower.

In late May, Big Grower had the opportunity to sit down with the three different generations of the Huntington family who are responsible for where Pleasant View Gardens came from, where it is today and where the company is headed in the future.

Company founder and patriarch Jon and his sons Henry, president and CEO, and Jeff, vice president and COO, have guided the company from its modest beginning.

And now, the third generation of Huntingtons, Jeff's sons, Ben and Andy, and Henry's son Jon, is preparing to eventually take the reins of the company. Ben runs Pleasant View's Pickup Yard for wholesale customers, Andy is the company's national sales manager and Jon is the logistics manager.

PLEASANT VIEW GARDENS: AT A GLANCE

Year Founded:
1976

Location(s):
Loudon (2) and Pembroke, New Hampshire, and Alajuela, Costa Rica

Total Growing Space:
660,000 square feet in New Hampshire, 320,000 square feet in Costa Rica and approximately 200,000 square feet at contract growers

Key Management Personnel & Titles:
Henry Huntington, president/CEO, Jeff Huntington, vice president/COO, Barry Vater, general manager

Number of Full Time and Seasonal Employees:
100 full-time/200 seasonal

Customers:
3,000+



The next generation of Huntingtons, Jon, Andy and Ben, are all alums of GPN's 40 Under 40 program.

BUILDING A BENCH FOR THE FUTURE

One of Pleasant View Gardens' specialties is finding up-and-coming horticultural talent. Over the past six years, the company has been a bountiful source for GPN's 40 Under 40 program. Ben Huntington was a member of the Class of 2013 and Andy was in the Class of 2015. Jon is a member of this year's class.

Since GPN began recognizing the next generation of horticulture in 2012, in addition to the three Huntington sons, Pleasant View's employees Adam Moseley, Jessica Boldt, Aleksy Yosifov and Dave Brobst have also been a part of GPN's 40 Under 40. Moseley and Boldt were also recipients of the GPN/Nexus Intern of the Year scholarship while they were in college.

"Our success is related to our team. We have been lucky enough to find people who really believe in what we are doing. They put their heart and soul into it and they believe in the company," Henry Huntington says.

"We are always trying to identify the young people in the company — The Bench — and we are spending a lot of money on training and leadership programs to really elevate them," because they are the ones that are helping make things happen both today and in the future.

"We've got some real up-and-comers working here," Henry proclaims.

A Bold Move

Back in the mid 1970s, Jon and his wife Eleanor were running a very successful farmstand business selling fruits and vegetables in Connecticut. While on vacation in New Hampshire, Jon was presented with an enticing offer to buy a small three-greenhouse wholesale foliage business in Loudon, approximately 75 miles north of Boston.



During peak season, Pleasant View Gardens employs more than 300 workers to serve its young plant and finished customers.



Pleasant View Gardens is committed to producing the highest quality liners and finished plants for growers and retail garden centers.

"So, without too much thinking, we bought it," Jon recalls.

While his wife wasn't real keen on the move at the time, and Jon wasn't exactly sure what he had gotten the family into, he knew he was up for the new challenge.

"We wanted to try and create a Boston market up north so people wouldn't have to travel down to Boston," he remarks.

After graduating from college, Henry and Jeff joined their father in the business full time.

In the early days, they grew a lot of different products — foliage plants, perennials, bedding plants and more. Eventually they also got into the plug and cutting business.

In 1998, additional acreage was purchased in nearby Pembroke, New Hampshire, and more greenhouses were built. Today, the company has approximately 14 acres of production under cover and another 14 acres of outdoor production.

No matter who his customer was — another grower or a gardener — Jon always wanted to offer something that was new, unique and different.

"I was always afraid we were going to be left behind," Jon says. That is what always drove him to find the "latest and greatest" products and processes for his customers.

That also helped serve as the impetus for launching the Proven Winners brand in 1992, along with Four Star Greenhouse in Michigan and EuroAmerican Propagators in California.

Jon has seen a lot of changes in his company and the industry over the past four decades. "Looking back, it was tough in the beginning, but here we are 40+ years later," Jon says smiling as he looks at his sons and grandsons.

Taking Care of Business

Pleasant View's growth and success over the years has been the result of a lot of mud, sweat and tears. "We worked our butts off, that's all there is to it," Jon proclaims.

Jon, Henry and Jeff all agree that Pleasant View Gardens would not be where it is today if they had not been willing to try new things, find new products and take a few risks to meet the needs of their grower and retail customers.

"Pleasant View is all about delivering quality product and service for our customers to be successful," Henry says. "Our goal from the very beginning was always to offer our customers the latest and greatest genetics."

"And we want to try and create new opportunities for them too," Jeff adds. "We want to make it easier for them."

The diverse product selection offered by Pleasant View Gardens includes annuals, ornamentals, shrubs, herbs and edibles, succulents and more. The company focuses on high-quality standards, innovative solutions and excellent service.

"We have programs and products that will fit every size and every budget," Andy states. "We are in the perfect position to serve [growers and retailers] of all shapes and sizes."

Focusing on the customer's success has led to the success of Pleasant View Gardens too. "We changed our tagline last year to 'Growing



Jon Huntington (center) founded Pleasant View Gardens in 1976 and was soon joined by his sons, Henry and Jeff.



From discovering the latest genetics to finding innovative ways to grow plants, research has played an important role in Pleasant View Gardens' success.

"Success! We are doing whatever needs to be done to help growers be successful," young Jon says. "Whatever it takes to make the customer a better grower."

"Our customers come to us because they know we have the products that are going to make their customers look like rock stars. They know we have the plants that are going to solve their needs. It's all about offering the right solutions," adds Ben.

Creating a Brand

In 1992, the Proven Winners brand was created by Pleasant View, Four Star Greenhouse and EuroAmerican Propagators. Proven Winners added Spring Meadows Nursery's shrub line in 2004 and perennials from Walters Gardens in 2011.

Henry said when the brand was created, the founding partners wanted to team up to deliver unique genetics to the marketplace. "It really took off from the beginning. We were in the right place at the right time with the right people," he says.

Henry continues, "And being a finished grower, it was perfect for us. The young plants went right into our finished program."

This past January, EuroAmerican Propagators dropped out of the cooperative



lēf Farms is 100% hydroponic, which translates to better food safety, more consistent high quality and a more sustainable environment.

A FRESH NEW VENTURE

While Pleasant View Gardens is growing and selling its Savor line of herbs and veggies, the Huntington family has also invested in another edible-product venture — lēf Farms.

But lēf Farms (www.lef-farms.com) doesn't grow products for growers or garden centers, it produces produce — fresh, healthy, pesticide-free greens for local restaurants, grocery stores, schools and other locations in the Northeast.

Henry Huntington got the idea when he was looking for an opportunity to fill empty greenhouse space during the off season. "We saw the whole local movement going crazy and we wondered if there was an opportunity for Pleasant View [in that category]."

After some initial exploration, they realized that growing edibles in the Pleasant View greenhouses didn't really make economic or practical sense. But he was "still looking at the future and how we could diversify," and was intrigued by the possibilities of a different type of growing operation that could operate all year round.

From that idea lēf Farms was born. It is a hydroponic greenhouse operation currently growing in a 75,000-square-foot facility a few miles away from Pleasant View's other greenhouses.

when the company declared Chapter 7 bankruptcy. That has definitely impacted Pleasant View in 2017.

"The bankruptcy was a bittersweet thing," Henry remarks. "We all worked together for 25 years to build this very successful brand, so it was a sad day when they made the announcement."

While the filing couldn't have come at a worse time (right in the middle of young plant season), both Pleasant View and Four Star were able to

Henry teamed up with Bob LaDue, a growing veteran with more than 20 years of experience working with controlled greenhouse environments to develop a plan for lēf. LaDue is the vice president and chief operating officer of the new venture.

Huntington and LaDue knew that advanced technology was going to be a key component of the new operation, so they worked with a Finnish company, Green Automation, to create a totally automated production line.

Henry says it is a huge investment but it's all about growing a fresh product for the people in the Northeast rather than shipping products in from the West Coast or Mexico. In fact, lēf Farms is expected to grow 1.5 million pounds of fresh greens per year.

From the business side of things, he says, "We want to run lēf like we do Pleasant View. Be unique. Be innovative. And we want to be unique and innovative in our marketing." The same type of approach they are using for Savor Edibles & Fragrants.

Henry is very enthusiastic about the potential for the new operation and said they are planning to add new greenhouse space at lēf Farms later this year.

react quickly. "The positive side of who we are as a Proven Winners group is that we were able to manage the situation" and fulfill almost all of the orders that had already been placed.

Going forward, Henry says Proven Winners does not intend to set up a West coast supplier to replace EuroAmerican. "Between Four Star and ourselves, we feel we can supply customers anywhere in the country."

On the sales side, Andy says his team had to answer a lot of questions and educate Proven





The Savor Edibles & Fragrants line of vegetables and herbs was launched in 2016 to attract millennial consumers.



Pleasant View Gardens provides a diverse line of products — both young plants and finished plants — to a wide variety of growers and retailers.

Winners customers about what was happening and how things would be handled this past spring and in the future.

“We were pretty transparent about what had happened and at the end of the day, I think Proven Winners is going to emerge even stronger,” Andy says.

All in the Family

In the Pleasant View Gardens catalog, there is a quote that sums up one of the key tenets of the company, “We’ve always believed true beauty comes from equal parts sunlight, soil, water, fertilizer and people.”

And all six of the Huntingtons credit the people that work at Pleasant View for helping make the company successful.

“The people that work here are all a part of our family,” Ben states.

Henry adds, “Our success is related to our team. We have tried to build a culture that is like a family. [The employees] love what they do and they put their all into it. We are really lucky to have a phenomenal team.”

But like most growers across the country, finding good production workers is always a challenge. Henry and Jeff both admit that finding the right type of employees is not easy. “When we talk about long-term strategic planning, labor and the cost of labor are always at the top of the list,” Henry says.

The company is looking to technology to address this issue. Later this year, they plan to invest in automated equipment like transplanters and sticking machines to help ease current as well as future labor challenges.

“We have to continue to innovate and figure out ways of how we will get our job done in the future,” Henry says.

The company also is MPS certified and has been practicing lean manufacturing techniques for the past five or six years. “That has been a huge benefit for us. It’s really pretty simple but you have to stop and take the time to do it. It really works,” Henry says.

And the company has developed a lot of different in-house software solutions to help improve the way they do things and the quality of their products.

“In the end, we are all about growing quality product,” young Jon adds. “We want to make sure everyone is getting the top-quality products that we produce.”

“It may not always be easy behind the scenes but it works for the customer,” Andy remarks.

A Tasty New Addition

One of Pleasant View Gardens’ major initiatives over the past two years has been the launch of Savor Edibles & Fragrants — a fresh, new line of vegetables and herbs with approximately 150 different varieties in it.

Pleasant View had been growing herbs for years but they wanted to jump start the program, so Savor was born in 2016. Instead of going after the traditional baby boomer gardener, the Savor line is aimed at millennials who want to grow what they eat.

The Savor brand has a bold and original look that is eye catching and makes a statement to its target demographic. The line has creative merchandising tools, from branded, plantable coir pots, cart strips and bench tape, to benchcards, trolley signs and posters that a retailer can use.

Henry credited Nathan Keil, Pleasant View’s marketing manager, for helping to launch the program.

“We wanted to take a different approach. That’s what we do. We want to offer consumers something that is new, unique and different,” says Andy. “We have put a lot of time, energy and resources into [the program].”

Andy says Savor is all about the demographics of the end consumer. “This is a stepping stone or a gateway [for millennials] to get them into gardening for life,” Andy states.

That is also why they chose the tagline “Grow Your Own Adventure.”

“We want people to come back to Savor year after year because they’ve been so successful in their gardening adventure,” Keil said when the company launched the line. “In fact, our tagline ... speaks directly to that point, as we look to redefine the whole edible growing experience.”

This is only the second season for Savor and they continue to tweak the program. Henry says, “It is a different sell [to growers and garden centers]. We are still on the ground floor,” and figuring out the best way both growers and retailers can take advantage of the program.

SEE PLEASANT VIEW GARDENS AND LĒF FARMS FOR YOURSELF

Want to learn more about Pleasant View Gardens and lēf Farms?

Why not see both facilities for yourself by attending the 2017 Big Grower Executive Summit?

During this year’s Summit, attendees will have the opportunity to visit both facilities.

The theme for this year’s Summit is “What’s Next?” The goal of the Summit is to provide growers with exclusive insight into the changing dynamics of today’s marketplace.

In addition to the behind-the-scenes tours, there will be two-and-a-half days of outstanding educational sessions and multiple networking opportunities.

The Big Grower Executive Summit will take place Oct. 1-3, in Wakefield, Massachusetts (near Boston).

For more information on the Summit, go to www.biggrower.com/executivesummit.

BIG GROWER
executive
summit 2017

Growing Forward

The Huntington family tree has some deep roots and it continues to branch out.

Following in the footsteps of their grandfather and fathers, the three young Huntingtons know they will be responsible for taking the company to the next level in the coming years.

Ben knows one of the challenges that the company faces is appealing to new and younger customers. That will be critical to the company's future. He would love to see someone develop a reality TV show based on plants and gardening similar to some of the cooking shows that are on the air today. That is something that everyone could benefit from.

Andy is excited about the future. "We are primed for growth," he declares. "I think we [as a company] are doing all of the right things to position [the company and the Proven Winners brand] for the future."

Young Jon is enthusiastic about the continued success of the brand and Pleasant View Gardens. "There is so much potential here. The three of us [Ben, Andy and himself] are ready to do it." ■



Pleasant View Gardens produces a diverse selection of plant material – from annuals, ornamentals and shrubs to herbs, edibles, succulents and more.



Orchid Plug

Cultivate, 17



ORCHIDS
DONE RIGHT



Booth #0503



Jiffy Products of America Inc.
Toll Free 1-800-323-1047
E-mail: prosales@jiffygroup.com
www.jiffygroup.com



Looking for a back issue of GPN's Big Grower?



Visit
gpnmag.com/magazine
to access our archives