

A Unique Approach

Roberta's Unique Gardens is flourishing in today's ever-changing marketplace.

BY TIM HODSON

As any grower knows, selling plants to today's consumers can be a challenge. Many need to actually see the plant in person, touch it, smell it before they make their purchasing decision.

So, imagine trying to sell plants to consumers on TV.

That is what Eric Wallien has been dealing with for nearly 20 years.

Wallien is the president of Roberta's Unique Gardens in Waldron, Indiana.

Roberta's is a fourth-generation, family-owned company that has been growing and selling plants at flower and garden shows for more than 50 years. Since 1998, Roberta's also has been selling plants to gardeners on the QVC home shopping network as well as on its website.

Last September, Wallien and Roberta's made news around the industry when it was announced his company would be purchasing young plant supplier C. Raker & Sons in Litchfield, Michigan. The acquisition was finalized last month and the "new" company was introduced as Raker Roberta's Young Plants (see sidebar).

Big Grower paid a visit to Roberta's Unique Gardens in November to learn a little more about the company, its products and its approach to dealing with today's consumers.

DEEP ROOTS

The company's roots began in 1957 with Wallien's grandmother, Sylvia, who was an avid traveler. During her global travels, she would find unique plants and bring them back with her. "She would find things you could not find anywhere else," Wallien says.

After a while, Wallien's father, Ernie, and Sylvia realized they could sell these distinctive plants in the U.S. at flower shows and state fairs. So, they created a new company and named it after Eric's mother — Roberta.

In the early days, Roberta's sold cuttings, bare root products, rhizomes



ROBERTA'S UNIQUE GARDENS AT A GLANCE

Year Founded:

1978

Location:

Waldron, Indiana

Total growing space:

approximately 7 acres under plastic

Key Management Personnel & Titles:

Eric Wallien, president; Mark Scott, vice president; Ken Zauss, general manager/grower; Jason Garrison, customer service manager and internet sales; Mark Bruecks, on-air sales specialist; Koort Wallien, on-air spokesperson; Devin Wallien, assistant buyer and on-air spokesperson; Derek Wallien, on-air spokesperson; and Stefani Wallien, on-air spokesperson.

Number of Employees:

45 full time and up to 120 in shipping season

Customer base:

More than 200,000



Eric Wallien and his team at Roberta's travel around the world looking for "hard to find, easy to grow plants."



Roberta's has been selling plants on QVC for nearly 20 years including this new holiday amaryllis that debuted last November.

and similar items. As the company has grown, so has its product offerings. Today, Wallien and his team travel around the globe to find many new products. The company sells a wide variety of plants from bulbs to annuals to edibles to hardy perennials and more.

In 2016, the company shipped nearly 1 million packages to QVC customers.

Their goal back then, as it still is today, is to provide consumers with hard-to-find, but easy-to-grow plants. In fact, that is the company tagline.

Eric and his brothers, Kevin and Koort, grew up with Roberta's and have always been in the plant business. "My brothers and I never had a paper route or worked at a fast food restaurant. We always grew and sold plants," Wallien says.

Today, the company is run by Eric and Koort, along with Kevin's kids, Derek, Devin and Stefani. Kevin recently retired from the business.

REACHING TODAY'S GARDENER — ON TV

The bulk of Roberta's business does not take place in a garden center but over the airwaves of the QVC home shopping channel. Roberta's has been selling plants on QVC since 1998 — and they have been selling a lot of them. In 2016, the

company shipped nearly 1 million packages to QVC customers.

QVC broadcasts live 24 hours a day, 364 days of the year, reaching a community of affluent, educated women in more than 100 million American homes. That provides Wallien and his team with a lot of different opportunities to sell a lot of plants to a lot of different people. It can also create a few challenges.

"We kind of snuck in on the QVC business," in the late 1990s Wallien remarks. But it has become the backbone of the company. Wallien says it is not easy producing plants for a nationwide TV audience. "You have to figure out the best way to do it and then really commit yourself to doing it."

In the early QVC days, Roberta's was only selling tropical houseplants. "But when one product works on QVC, they will always



RAKER-ROBERTA'S

INTRODUCING RAKER-ROBERTA'S YOUNG PLANTS

Right before Labor Day last September, GPN received a press release stating, "Roberta's Announces Acquisition of C. Raker & Sons, Inc."

Over the summer, there had been talk around the industry that the Litchfield, Michigan-based Raker young plant business was for sale.

On Dec. 1, 2017, Raker-Roberta's Young Plants was born as Eric Wallien, president of Roberta's Unique Gardens, acquired the company.

Roberta's had been a customer of Raker since 2011. So, when Wallien was at Cultivate'17 last summer in Columbus, Ohio, he met with Susie Raker-Zimmerman, Raker's general manager, to learn more about what was going on at the company and how it could potentially impact Roberta's.

Raker-Zimmerman explained to him that the company was under pressure from its bank and was looking at its options.

"I had really formed a strong relationship with the team at Roberta's over the last few years," Raker-Zimmerman said. "They had become an important part of our shoulder business."

After she discussed the situation with Wallien, he expressed interest in buying the company.

The acquisition happened pretty fast. "The relationship I had with Susie had everything to do [with making the deal]. We've been doing business with them for a while. Their quality had always been great. We never had any problems," Wallien said.

The acquisition allows Wallien to diversify his business and for Raker to operate under a new and improved financial structure. Both Raker-Zimmerman and Wallien anticipate

that it will be business as usual for the "new" young plant company in 2018.

Raker-Zimmerman, who is now vice president of the new company, said her team from Raker remains intact and "is ready to tackle the future."

"Susie's got a great team in Litchfield," Wallien said. "We are talking every day and really looking forward to things working well."

Another benefit of the acquisition for Roberta's is the 9+ acres of Raker Trials Gardens (<http://trialgardens.raker.com/>) where the Raker-Roberta's team will plant approximately 110,000 plants in 2018.

Ken Zauss, Roberta's general manager, is really looking forward to seeing all of those plants in the ground and learning about how potential new products will perform.

"We are really excited about taking advantage of the Raker Trials Gardens. That garden is awesome!" Zauss declares.

challenge you and ask, 'What else do you have?'" Wallien says. "Every year they challenge us to bring in something new."

He says this is what helps drive Roberta's to continually find new products and grow the company.

MASTERING THE JUGGLING ACT

Growing and selling plants for QVC customers is not the same as growing and selling for a traditional garden center or retailer. There are a lot of variables that have to be juggled including crop timing, shipping

issues and dealing with novice gardeners just to name a few.

Over the years, Roberta's would only sell products on QVC from January to May. That has changed considerably. Wallien says they were able to really expand their line in 2017 as Roberta's was on the QVC airwaves 10 of the 12 months.

For the first time this past November, Wallien was on the air selling holiday amaryllis. He said it can be a challenge for the growing staff when introducing a new product on QVC because you never know how it will be received nationwide and how many plants they will need to grow to

From the novice to the master gardener, helping customers be successful is crucial.



Roberta's has built its reputation on the quality of its finished product. From seeding liners to sticking cuttings, quality starts at the very beginning of the planting process.

fill the orders. Every new product introduction and every appearance on QVC is a learning experience he says.

"It is tough because we are shipping by zone and having the crops physiologically ready to go and be shipped at the right time is challenging. That can be really tough," says Ken Zauss, Roberta's general manager. But at the same time, he says he enjoys putting together the entire production plan.

Zauss and Wallien both agree that it is a juggling act figuring out what needs to be grown and how it will be grown. Roberta's grows many of its own plants but also works with contract growers around the country (including the former C. Raker & Sons) to produce its plants for QVC customers in different zones.

HELPING CONSUMERS BE SUCCESSFUL

Roberta's customer base is very diverse. From the novice to the master gardener, helping customers be successful is crucial for the company.

"Most of the time, the person turning on the TV has no intention of buying a plant. It becomes an impulse buy [as they are clicking through the channels]. And once they see it on TV and learn more about it, we make her think about gardening" and she will make the purchase, Wallien states. That's when the "gardening" process gets started.

"That's why the 'Easy to Grow' part of our tagline is really important," Wallien says. If it is difficult to grow, customers will remember that and may not be as likely to purchase from the company in the future.

And customers always have questions. Jason Garrison heads up Roberta's Customer Service division and he is on the front lines when it comes to dealing with customers' questions.

During the spring, it is not unusual for his team of 12 people to get 600-700 calls a day looking for information. He says they have to be part garden coach, part counselor and hand holder to many of the callers and walk them through a product or a process to help them.

"They want to talk to a live person," Garrison says. "They are looking for information or need some reinforcement from us."

Garrison and his team work diligently to answer their questions and take care of any issues they may have with their purchases.

"The more information we can give them, the better. We want them to be successful!" ■