

GROWING Every Day

Since 1981, innovative plants, production processes and people have been the impetus for growth at Spring Meadow Nursery.

BY TIM HODSON

Even though Spring Meadow Nursery was founded nearly 40 years ago, the attitude around the company today is that it is still just getting off to a good start.

Founder and owner Dale Deppe's philosophy has always been to constantly improve on each and every aspect of the company on a daily basis.

"If I were to look back on our history, I think we have done a pretty good job of always trying to move the needle a little bit — every day!" Dale declares.

"We are continually building something long term here," says Dale's son, Jeremy, general manager of the flowering shrub liner producer based in Grand Haven, Michigan. "And we are never done building [on our past]. Everything we do, touch and talk about can get better every day."

Jeremy says his father "has ingrained in all of us that everything we are currently doing is a good start" for the future.

In early August, Big Grower had the opportunity to sit down with Dale and Jeremy Deppe and Tim Wood, plant development and marketing manager, in the company's brand new offices.

In fact, employees had only been in the building for less than a week after a fire last year destroyed the company's original offices (see sidebar).



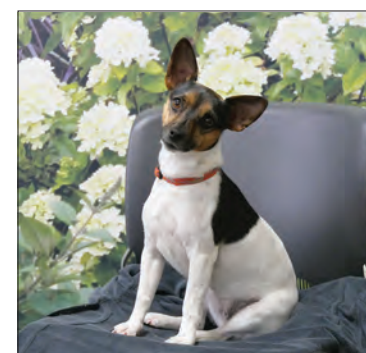
SPRING MEADOW NURSERY AT A GLANCE

Year Founded:
1981

Location:
Grand Haven, Michigan

Key Management:
Dale and Liz Deppe, founders and owners; Jeremy Deppe, general manager; Tim Wood, new plant development and marketing manager; Rosie, head greeter and ball chaser

Facilities:
5 acres of propagation space; 27 acres of greenhouse growing space; 4 acres of R&D greenhouses; 100 acres of stock plants



**ROSIE - HEAD GREETER
AND BALL CHASER**

Number of Employees:
Approximately 220 (70 year-round and 150 seasonal)

**Customer base/
geographic area covered:**
U.S. and Canada

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Dale got hooked on horticulture when he was in high school and worked in a nursery and garden center. After graduating from Michigan State University, Deppe began his career working for nurseries in Michigan and spent nearly a decade working in shrub propagation.

When he lost his job during the economic downturn of the early 1980s, Dale and his wife, Liz, made the decision to start Spring Meadow Nursery in 1981.

At the time, they had just built a new house, had two young children, Dale was doing contract growing and Liz had recently received an accounting degree.

"Back then we were bootstrapping. Growing our food and making cuttings all day," Dale recalls. "We lived off of [Liz's] salary for the first five years or so. Every dollar we made at Spring Meadow went into building new facilities."

Deppe started the business with 20 acres for stock and field growing and a single 15 by 100-foot greenhouse. His inventory list then consisted of approximately 25 deciduous shrubs that were shipped to approximately 100 potential customers.

To succeed in the ultra-competitive liner business, Deppe knew Spring Meadow would have to bring something different to the marketplace.

"We learned pretty quickly that the only way to get a new customer was based on having new plants they couldn't buy somewhere else," Dale says. "They weren't looking for another supplier, they were looking for a new plant variety."

They also learned early on that the company's future success was in plant licensing. "The real revolution for us at that time was that [by licensing varieties] we were able to get a few more cents per plant compared to the generics."

Whenever a new plant was discovered, Spring Meadow also would negotiate with the breeder so that a percentage of the royalty would go directly to the marketing of that plant.

"That little idea kind of revolutionized everything on the marketing side for woody shrubs," says Dale.

In 1995, Tim Wood was hired as new plant development and marketing manager. His job as the Plant Hunter was and still is to go out and find exclusive shrub

varieties that Spring Meadow can grow and sell to the market.

Another early marketing innovation for Spring Meadow was the publication of its first-ever color catalog in 1996. "New people coming into the industry today don't understand how [novel that was] 25 years ago," Dale says. Most liner producers were just selling their product from a plant list.

"Not many people even had color tags back then," Wood adds.

"Color sells. Every one of us is influenced by a good picture," Dale declares.

BUILDING ON A BRAND

When the company first started introducing proprietary plants, they grouped them together and called them FirstChoice liners. In 1999, the name was changed to ColorChoice.

"We started licensing ColorChoice with its own tag. It wasn't so much a brand, but rather our new plant introduction program," Dale says. "We did not have the resources back then to create a real brand, will all the expectations that come with it."

Long term, Deppe knew branding would be very important to the company's future. So, they began to do their homework on the branding side of the business.

The company had discussions with a number of people and companies, including Tom Smith of Four Star Greenhouse in Carleton, Michigan, one of the founding companies of Proven Winners.

At first, Deppe (shrubs) and Smith (annuals) thought that their businesses were very dissimilar, but it didn't take long to realize they weren't.

"The whole supply chain meets at the garden center and we are all trying to manage that and be successful," Dale says. "Once we got to know each other a little bit, we asked ourselves, 'Why are we trying to do this separately?'"

In 2004, Spring Meadow Nursery joined with the Proven Winners brand, as an exclusive woody plant licensee to select, develop, distribute and market Proven Winners ColorChoice flowering shrubs as a part of the brand.

"It was somewhat of a natural progression for us," Dale says.

In the nearly 15 years that Spring Meadow has been a part of Proven Winners, Deppe says they have always had an excellent relationship with the brand's other companies.



The team at Spring Meadow is constantly building new greenhouses to meet the growing needs of the company's customers.

A BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

In the early morning hours of Jan. 15, 2017, a massive fire destroyed the main office building at Spring Meadow Nursery in Grand Haven, Michigan.

The fire started in the attic of the building and burned for several hours before anyone noticed it.

The building and its contents were a total loss. Fortunately, no one was injured and no plants or growing space were lost. Because damage to the building was so severe, fire and insurance investigators have never been able to pinpoint the exact cause of the fire.

Before the fire occurred, Jeremy Deppe said they were running out of space in the old building and they were planning on expanding. The fire expedited that plan and last month employees began moving into the new office that is less than 50 yards from where the old building stood.

The new (and much larger) office building was designed to provide employees with an enhanced work environment. It even has a 200-seat conference center complete with a stage and video wall for customer events and employee meetings.



"The new office building represents the way we run the whole business. We want to give our team the best tools and resources to do their job really, really well," Jeremy states. "We want to provide the team with a [workspace] that makes them happy and helps them invest with us long term. So, we have invested in them so they will invest in us."

The new building provides other benefits too. "We were short on conference rooms and short on bathrooms. Neither one of those are a problem now," Dale quips.



The Spring Meadow catalog contains more than 450 flowering shrub varieties with more than 285 of them marketed under the Proven Winners ColorChoice brand.

He said it is almost like a marketing co-op where everyone gets to focus on their specialties but then goes to market as a single brand.

"Instead of one company trying to be good at a lot of different things and never getting good at anything, we are segmented in a way that each of us gets to be really good at what we do," Wood says.

SMART AND RESOURCEFUL INVESTMENTS

As general manager, Jeremy is always looking for ways to enhance Spring Meadow's operations.

"From a technology perspective, we are trying to automate as many things as we can. That has helped with product consistency and labor efficiencies," he says.

"We have invested heavily in lean flow. Lean changes us tremendously in terms of the amount of people and how we produce our products," Jeremy adds. "It has made us much more efficient and our people to be much more productive — and it has allowed us to grow."

Both Dale and Jeremy are extremely proud of the team they have put together.

"What sets us apart from our competitors is our team. We feel we have the best team in the industry," Jeremy says. "It is a great combination of experience and youth. Everyone is trying to get better every day. They make our job look easy!"

Dale is always willing to invest in people and equipment. "From a staffing and equipment standpoint, we almost never say no — almost never," he says with a smile. "If you need something to make your job more productive, come tell me about it."

Those types of investments are easy to make because they almost always pay for themselves, Dale says.

WITH SUCCESS COMES RESPONSIBILITY

Dale and Liz Deppe believe that "giving is a responsibility that accompanies success" and generously donate to many local and national organizations "that embody the spirit of innovation and positive change and that further growth for all of us."

Some of the organizations that Spring Meadow supports include

A GOOD START

Earlier this summer at Cultivate'18, Dale Deppe and PR specialist, Natalie Carmolli, took the stage at the State of the Industry keynote presentation to announce that Spring Meadow Nursery's Invincibelle Spirit Campaign for a Cure has surpassed the \$1 million donation mark to raise money for breast cancer research.

Since 2009, the Invincibelle Spirit Campaign has supported the Breast Cancer Research Foundation (BCRF) by donating one dollar for every Invincibelle Spirit and Invincibelle Spirit II hydrangea sold, as well as through Pink Day cause marketing events, which are hosted by independent garden centers across North America.

According to Tim Wood, when the company introduced its pink *Hydrangea arborescens* 10 years ago, "We felt that it was so unusual, so groundbreaking that it presented a really good opportunity to do something different."

After doing their homework, they decided breast cancer research was a very deserving cause to focus their efforts on.

At the time, the management team was unsure of how much money they should devote per plant to the cause, so the concept was presented to some of Spring Meadow's top growers and licensees. "They pushed us to raise it to a dollar. They said it HAD to be a dollar!" Wood says.

BCRF was chosen because it is the highest rated breast cancer organization in the U.S.



with an A+ rating from Charity Watch and 4 out of 4 stars from Charity Navigator. Allocating 91 cents of every \$1 raised to research and awareness, BCRF provides critical funding that fuels advances in tumor biology, genetics, prevention, treatment, metastasis and survivorship.

"A big part of what the research does is it looks for a cure but it also looks for a way to improve the quality of life for people fighting breast cancer and to improve their longevity," Carmolli says.

Wood and Deppe said the program is not about the plants or about Spring Meadow; it is all about the cause.

"There is an amazing emotional connection, which is hard to describe," Deppe says. "Everyone knows someone affected by breast cancer. It's an opportunity for all of us to do something positive — and \$1 million is a good start!"

You can learn more about the *Invincibelle Spirit Campaign* by visiting www.invincibellespirit.net.



Dale Deppe started Spring Meadow Nursery in 1981 with a single 15-by-100 square foot greenhouse. Today, the 250-acre propagation nursery has 32 traditional polyhouses and over 42 acres of heated, computerized greenhouses.



Jeremy Deppe says the Spring Meadow team is "what sets us apart from our competition."

the Horticultural Research Institute (HRI), the Spring Meadow-Proven Winners Scholarship program, the National Collegiate Landscape Competition, the International Plant Propagators Society and the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

The company has created a voluntary program for its customers that whenever they make a purchase, the company will add ¼ of 1 percent of the total of an invoice as a contribution to HRI.

Spring Meadow will then triple that donation and these funds are used to support the Spring Meadow Nursery New Plants Fund and the HRI Endowment Fund.

Each year the company also awards three \$3,500 scholarships to well-qualified college students who are essential to the continued success of the nursery industry.

Another one of the company's major initiatives is the Invincibelle Spirit Campaign for a Cure to help

fight breast cancer. The company, along with their customers, recently surpassed the \$1 million mark in donations to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation (see sidebar).

STAYING FOCUSED

From the very beginning, Dale Deppe has always taken a no-nonsense approach to business by focusing on what the company does best — producing high-quality, proprietary shrub liners.

He is continuously looking for ways to improve all aspects of the company. "When you do that, there is opportunity everywhere we look," he says.

One of the biggest challenges facing the company is deciding which opportunities make the most sense for Spring Meadow to pursue.

"We think that with all of the changes that have happened in the industry, it is a great time to be in this business," Jeremy declares. ■

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