

# WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOX...

**By staying nimble and agile, Knox Horticulture in Winter Garden, Florida, continues to grow and meet the new challenges and opportunities the industry has to offer.**

BY TIM HODSON

**O**ver the nearly 60 years that Knox Horticulture has been in existence, the company has grown from a mist box to grow cuttings for home use to acres and acres of greenhouses that produce more than 150 million plants (plugs, liners and finished product) for growers across the country.

Today, the company that Jim and Nadine Knox founded in 1962 continues to grow and take advantage of new opportunities thanks to a diverse product offering, superior customer service, the use of automation and technology, and providing a family atmosphere for its employees.

Big Grower paid a visit to Winter Garden, Florida, in late January, to talk to Bruce Knox, president, and Steve Mullen, general manager, and learn how the bedding plant producer has evolved over the years and what it is doing today.

## FROM THE PATIO TO THE ORANGE GROVES

"This company started as a hobby in my parents' backyard in a 4-by-8-foot mist box," says Bruce Knox.

## KNOX HORTICULTURE

### AT A GLANCE

**Year Founded:**

1962

**Location:**

Winter Garden Florida

**Key Management:**

Bruce Knox, president; Steve Mullen, general manager; Mary Zubrod-Pinkham, production manager; Greg Grothe, head grower-young plants; Chris Seefeldt, special projects manager; Daisy Ramos, production, coordinator for vegetative program; Stephen Weichsel, customer service manager-young plants; Eric Claiborne, senior software developer

**Number of Employees:**

Approximately 165

**Production Space:**

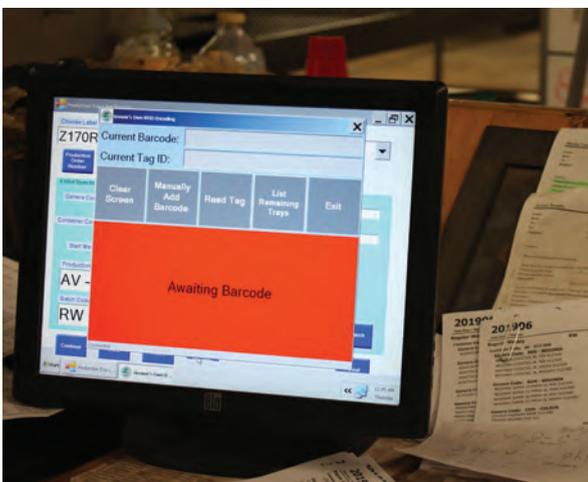
25 acres

**Number of Plants Produced Annually:**

150 million

**Website:**

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



To grow high-quality products, Knox Horticulture makes extensive use of automation and computer technology like developing its own radio frequency identification (RFID) system to track products from seed to shipping dock.



Back then his parents were growing cuttings on the patio for their own garden. In the summer of 1962, they made their first commercial sale. Nowadays, the company sits on 33 acres of former orange groves in Winter Garden with more than 25 acres of production space.

In the early years, they were growing woody tropicals. Then as the industry changed, they started brokering bedding plants that were sold at some of the larger regional retailers. In the 1980s, the decision was made to also start growing plugs “while keeping a balancing act of selling bedding plants to mass merchants.”

Currently, the company’s primary business is supplying young plants to growers, and also providing finished plants to landscape companies and many of the theme parks in central Florida. The company also produces EZ-pots, its own brand of Ellepots — degradable paper pots (see sidebar). In 2015, the company was also one of the first growers in Florida to receive a license to grow cannabis for medical use through its affiliated company Knox Medical.

For years, the company was known as Knox Nursery but changed its name recently to Knox Horticulture (see sidebar) to reflect the how the business has transformed in more than five decades. “It’s really interesting to see how the industry has changed over the years,” Knox says.

From specializing in specific product categories to adjusting to the industry consolidation of both growers and suppliers, Knox Horticulture has always been able to adapt and take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves.

“It’s kind of scary to think of how much change the industry has seen [over the years]. What is this industry going to look like in 20 or 30 years?” he asks. “It’s going to be very interesting.”

And Knox and Mullen are up for the challenge.

### PRODUCT DIVERSITY, MOTHER NATURE AND LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Knox says one of the biggest strengths the company capitalizes on is the depth of its

## KNOX NURSERY BECOMES KNOX HORTICULTURE

In 2015, Knox Nursery was awarded one of the original licenses to grow medical cannabis in Florida.

Because of the complexities and legal requirements involved with applying for and holding a license to grow cannabis in the state, Knox Nursery changed its name to Knox Horticulture in 2018.

Not knowing how the requirements for medical cannabis licensees might change in the future, Knox made the proactive decision to create two separate entities — Knox Horticulture and Knox Medical — just in case the name “Knox Nursery” would always be required to be on that license.

“I think Knox Horticulture is more representative of who we are today,” Knox says. “We are no longer a nursery. We are no longer growing the 3-gallon woody tropicals that my parents focused on when they started the company. And I think it was just time for a change.”

He adds the new name allows the bedding plant producer to be flexible going forward and adapt to future changes.

product offerings. Knox Horticulture offers its customers more than 5,000 different products. It is an open propagator that works with a wide range of breeding organizations, seed companies and cuttings producers.

“We have such a diverse customer base, from customers that only buy one box at a time to those customers that order an entire truckload,” he says.

While he doesn’t like to call the business a one-stop shop, Knox says the company specializes in providing its customers with different solutions to meet all of their product requirements.

“Our customers come to us to fill all of their needs — whether it is seed or vegetative and combine things,” Knox says. This way they can be flexible with their product orders to meet minimums for rack deliveries.

Knox says thanks to its Florida location and Mother Nature, Knox Horticulture is able to stay ahead of the rest of the market as a young plant producer.



At Knox Horticulture, more than 160 "family members" produce 5,000+ different products for growers across the country on 25 acres of production space in central Florida.

"We have a weather advantage when it is most important [during the winter months]," Knox states. "We have a moderate climate. We are blessed to have one of the best climates for light so we don't have to do a lot of supplemental lighting. It creates a foundation for a better liner."

"We have the ability to send out pre-budded product in low-light conditions to the rest of the country. Our environmental conditions really separate us from the competition," he adds.

### THE DIFFERENTIATOR

"My parents' philosophy was to always try to grow exceptional quality plant materials and charge a fair price for it," Knox says. "I think that is still a major part of our philosophy today but the quality standard has been raised by the industry and that is just an expectation of our customers."

Knox says the challenge for the company today is to separate itself from the other young plant producers. That is why the company puts a major emphasis on its customer service.

"Customer service is what differentiates us from our competitors today," Knox says.

The company works very closely with the broker community who help deliver the company's message to growers across the country.

"You have to have a superior customer service team," Mullen remarks. "Our customer service team has become so important to our success

because of their relationships with the individuals at the broker companies and their customers."

"During every interaction, we need to thank our customers for their business. We never take them for granted," Knox adds. "The customer is our lifeblood. Without them we have nothing."

### CREATING SOLUTIONS

Knox Horticulture's production processes take advantage of the opportunities that automation and computer technology provide. "There is always constant change," Mullen says.

"If you are not evolving and changing, you are going to become stale and die. We are always looking for ways we can change [for the better] and innovate!"

One of those innovations is the use of radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. Mullen says the company was an early adopter of the technology. Over the years, and through some trial and error, the company developed its own custom RFID system that allows products to be tracked throughout the greenhouse all the way to shipping dock.

"We recognized the value of the technology immediately. We were able design a system that worked for us. It has helped us identify inventory as well as make sure we ship the right product to the customer every time," Mullen says.

## AN EZ OPTION FOR GROWERS

Knox Nursery was one of the early adopters of the jumbo Ellepots — the degradable paper pots that help promote root growth and provide labor savings. The paper pots allow for quick removal and faster planting; better rooting efficiency and are landscaper friendly.

"We were the first grower in the U.S. to adopt an 80-mm Ellepot [for finished products]. That really separated us from the marketplace and gave us a competitive advantage" with landscapers, Knox says.

Because of the success with Ellepots, the company bought the equipment to make its own pots (see photo above), named EZ-Pots, and sells them to other growers.

Today, all of the vegetative product produced by Knox Horticulture is produced in EZ pots.

The EZ-Pot system allows growers to choose the size pot and media type and then Knox Horticulture will produce the pots for them. They are available in a wide variety of sizes and tray configurations.

"We palletize them, shrink wrap them and ship them to customers across the country," Knox says.

The company even has an online store — The Home of the EZ-Pot — on its website ([www.knoxhort.com](http://www.knoxhort.com)).



Knox Horticulture produces a wide range of finished products for landscapers and theme parks in Florida.



He adds that system provides a high degree of reliability and quality. "When something goes out the door, we always know it is the right item for the right order. It is virtually failsafe."

### ALL IN THE FAMILY

Like many other growers across the country, Knox Horticulture has the same challenges finding new labor every season. Being in Central Florida, the company has even more competition when it comes to finding new labor. The construction and hospitality industries are very robust in the region and that can create a challenge when it comes to hiring.

One way Knox Horticulture competes for new employees is by creating a family atmosphere. "We try to run this business like it is a family. We value everyone as a family member," Knox says.

Mullen says there is a core group of "family members" that have been with the company for 10, 15, even 20 years. In fact, Mullen has been with the company for almost 35 years and Knox, who grew up in the family business, also has been an "official" employee for nearly 35 years.

"I tell people when I interview them, 'You are not joining a company. You are joining a family!'" Mullen states.

By nurturing that family atmosphere, it creates a real team and helps build loyalty that is not only evident in their work lives but transcends into their personal lives too.

"These employees have done some amazing things for their coworkers," Mullen says.

He lists a number of times that the employees have pulled together to raise money or lend a helping hand to fellow employees who were dealing with hardships in their personal lives. And then the company always matches the funds that the employees raise to make an even bigger impact.

Knox says it is "incredibly gratifying" when employees do those kinds of things for their coworkers. "It really makes a difference."

Mullen adds that employees know they can rely on the other team members and the company "And that really means something nowadays."

### THE FUTURE

It's obvious as you talk to both Knox and Mullen that they are very passionate about what they do. The seasoned veterans enjoy coming to work every single day because no two days are alike.

"Every day provides you with something new ... some new challenge," Mullen states. "I really enjoy meeting the challenge of what the next day brings."

"We've all got a job to do. We've got to keep everything going," Knox says. "But there is so much satisfaction working in this business. It's all very rewarding!" ■

*On the cover: Front row left to right: Bruce Knox, president; Greg Grothe, head grower-young plants; Eric Claiborne, senior software developer; Daisy Ramos, production, coordinator for vegetative program. Back row: Chris Seefeldt, special projects manager; Stephen Weichsel, customer service manager-young plants; Mary Zubrod-Pinkham, production manager; and Steve Mullen, general manager.*



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