

# COVERING GROUND

## Five Decades Strong



**Midwest Groundcovers has earned a reputation in the Chicagoland area and greater Midwest for its focus on plant quality and customer service. The company is celebrating its continued success as this year marks its 50th year in operation.**

BY JASMINA DOLCE

**T**his year, Midwest Groundcovers is celebrating its 50th year in business. What started out as a 5-acre nursery in St. Charles, Illinois, has become a five-location operation spanning 700 acres across two states. So there's certainly much to celebrate!

While there has been a bit of evolution and expansion, the roots have remained. Founded in 1969 by Peter Orum, who immigrated from Denmark, and his wife Irma, Midwest Groundcovers supplied typical groundcovers — such as ivy, vinca, pachysandra, ajuga and sedum — to landscapers and garden centers throughout the Chicagoland area.



### MIDWEST GROUNDCOVERS AT A GLANCE

**Year Founded:**  
1969

**Founders:**  
Peter and Irma Orum

**Chairman & President:**  
Christa Orum-Keller

**Locations:**  
Four locations in Illinois, one location in Michigan

**Production Size:**  
700 acres

**Plant Categories:**  
Groundcovers and natives; perennials and ornamental grasses; shrubs, evergreens and woody plants



Today, the company has deepened its catalog to include items like shrubs, perennials and native plants — with groundcovers still making up a third of its production. And Peter has handed off the torch to daughter Christa Orum-Keller, president, who has taken the company's product offering and service to the next level.

### PRODUCT EVOLUTION

When they opened for business 50 years ago, Peter says he wanted the company to identify with where they were located and what they grew — hence the name Midwest Groundcovers. He says, "Our groundcovers became a brand, and that's all we grew for a number of years."

As the years went on, Peter listened to his customers and also kept an eye on industry trends. In the 70s, his customers brought up the idea of possibly growing shrubs and evergreens. And that's where the initial expansion took place.

Of course, to keep up with the product expansion, Midwest Groundcovers needed to acquire the appropriate space. In 1974, they purchased what is now their headquarters and sales facility down the road in St. Charles.

The following decade, the industry saw a huge increase in perennials. "We watched that, and at the end of the 80s we had to make a decision," says Peter. "It was becoming very clear that it was not a fad, so we decided to go full blown into perennials. Not just those that look like groundcovers, but everything."

That is when the Midwest Groundcovers catalog transformed from a small handheld brochure to a full book with hundreds of varieties. And in 1987, they opened another production nursery in Glenn, Michigan, which is responsible for producing most perennials, ornamental grasses and vinca.

Midwest Groundcovers' newest production facility was opened in 2001 and is located in Virgil, Illinois. It features four "growing areas," each having its own loading dock, storage facilities, and work/break areas. The goal of this nursery was to be able to work more efficiently and support specialized crops.

### COLLEGE PROJECT BECOMES A CAREER

As a child, Peter and Irma's daughter, Christa, spent lots of time in the nursery. As an adult, the passion remained and she obtained her bachelor's degree in landscape architecture. During her senior year, she used her parents' business for a school project.

"She said that we should plant some prairie plants, and she really designed the new office and sales yard," says Peter. "She put these prairie plants in and said that was going to be the future."

Her "project" has evolved over the years and has become the company's living catalog.

"The idea when we did the layout was that we would have some gardens around the office to demonstrate the plants," says Christa. "We wanted it to be an attractive garden in addition to showing the plants in an educational way."

And they try to keep the plants current with what is in the catalog. "If we take something out



Midwest Groundcovers uses the garden around their headquarters and sales facility to demonstrate plants from their catalog.



Hocus Pocus and Natural Garden Natives are two brands that have been successful for the company, not just with their customers, but all the way to the end consumer.



## A FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY



From water conservation to solar energy to recycling, sustainable practices are the foundation of Midwest Groundcovers.

"The biggest thing that we do and have done is water conservation," shares Christa. "Peter started this on the very first 5-acre property."

According to Peter, 85% of the operation's irrigation used recycled water. Christa elaborates, "Obviously we need it for the plants to grow, but it is the most costly for us to do ... all that grading to catching all our water and to reuse the water."

But all that hard work and investment has earned Midwest Groundcovers incredible recognition. In 2007, the Illinois chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects granted the operation's Virgil site the highest award for site design and planning.

Christa Orum-Keller working on her parents' nursery in 1974.



Midwest Groundcovers owns its own fleet of trucks that makes stops from Chicagoland through the greater Midwest.



of the product mix, we take it out of the garden," says Christa.

"The idea is to bring people here, educate our staff, educate the customers, and convince them to buy our plants," she adds.

### NURTURING THE LANDSCAPE MARKET

Christa took some time away from the family business following graduation and worked in landscape design, which ultimately gave her an advantage once she returned to Midwest Groundcovers.

From the company's beginning, the landscape market was a large focus for Midwest Groundcovers. And that relationship has really become a partnership with their customers.

"Christa has been particularly good in developing the contact with the landscape architects, which is what she is herself," Peter says. "So that's certainly been helpful for the business. Christa speaks their language."

This depth of knowledge and real experience with plants is ultimately what keeps their customers coming back.

"When they install a landscape, especially if it's a commercial landscape, the landscape contractor must guarantee the plants will live a year after they are installed. That's part of why they value if we say we've grown it in our garden and it lived over the winter. Then they know they can buy it from us and succeed."

Another perk that the landscape customers take advantage of is Midwest Groundcovers' shipping

capabilities. "I think our customers really rely on us. They know that we are reliable and that we have a system," says Christa. "We solve the problem of getting the product there and working with them in managing their orders."

Midwest Groundcovers delivers to customers throughout Chicagoland, and goes as far as Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and Ohio.

"We have specialized trucks, specialized cages and specialized equipment so we can get the plants unloaded quickly," she explains.

And in most cases, she says their turnaround on orders is within 48 hours.

### RAISING CONSUMER AWARENESS

While the landscape segment makes up a majority of Midwest Groundcovers' customer base, they also serve independent garden centers, the restoration market and conservation projects as well. Reaching the consumer helps all their customers succeed, so branding has become a huge initiative for the company.

Christa observed a change in the market as consumers began gravitating toward native plants. "In the 90s, things started to transition into native plants and we started hearing about invasive species," says Christa. "We began switching to native plants and expanding that line."

This later led to the company's acquisition of The Natural Garden, also located in St. Charles. "We took The Natural Garden and turned it into a brand," says Christa. "That's useful to our

## NOT JUST PLANTS



In 1981, Peter saw an opportunity growing out from his nursery through a product he created himself: potting soil. Peter created sister company, Midwest Trading, to offer customers the non-plant items they produced.

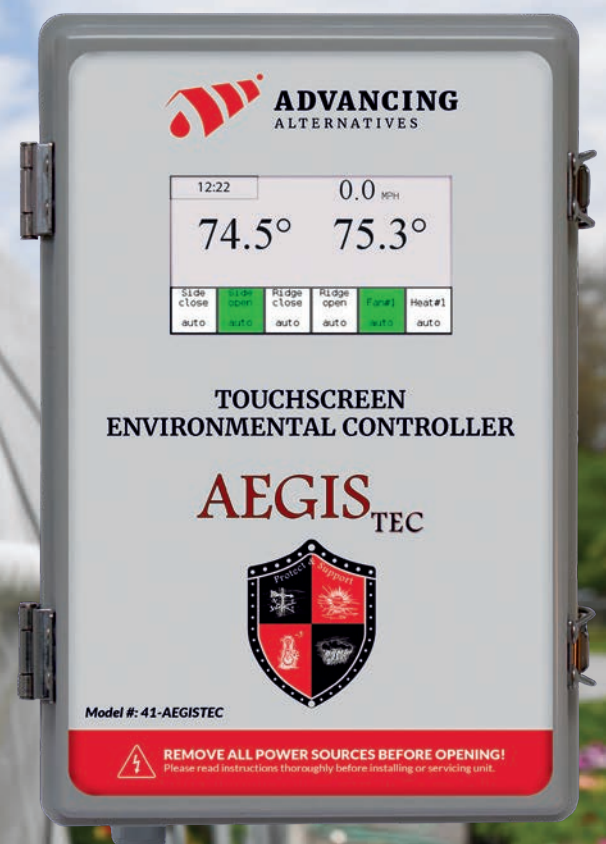
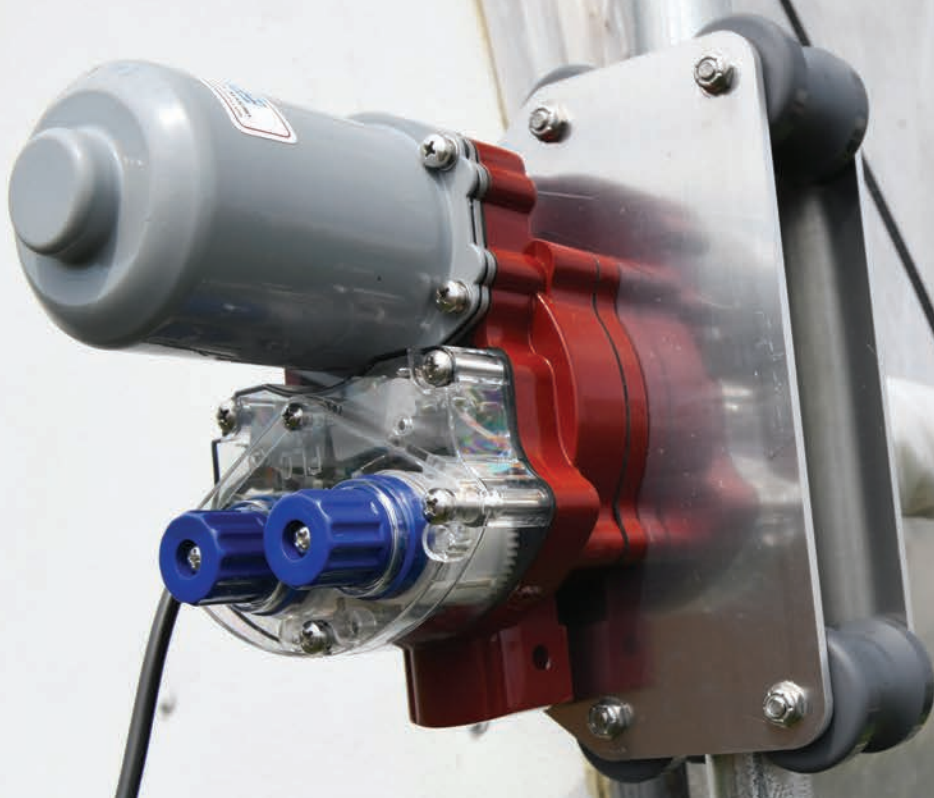
"Midwest Trading makes potting soil for ourselves, for nurseries and other greenhouses," Peter explains. "We also make compost and mulches for landscaping, and even Quonset poly greenhouse structures."

Midwest Trading is headquartered in Virgil, Illinois, which is where the potting soil facility is located. A bark processing facility is located in Ottawa, Illinois, where raw bark is processed and incorporated into mixes or used directly as mulch.

To learn more about Midwest Trading, go to [www.midwesttrading.com](http://www.midwesttrading.com).



## ADVANCING ALTERNATIVES



Automated ventilation is only a touch away!

customers, to have a local brand that is authentic and has value.”

Midwest Groundcovers also has a groundcover program, Hocus Pocus, which is specifically for independent garden centers. Hocus Pocus offers 85 unique, hardy and playful plants intended to cover the ground.

Christa says these specialized programs help their customers differentiate from the larger box stores. “We’re doing marketing and have websites and identity for those brands, so that’s helping solve a problem to help give those customers a sales advantage. There are national brands, but this is a unique thing that we can do to help them sell.”

Midwest Groundcovers goes even further to reach local consumers to create awareness. From placing ads through outlets like Chicagoland Gardening to partnering with local organizations, they connect with the consumer.

“We host events and donate plants to kids’ events at Brookfield Zoo and the Shedd Aquarium,” shares Christa. “With Natural Garden Natives, we support a number of conservation groups. We donate plants to make a garden. The name goes out there, and people who care about natives know. They knew what The Natural Garden was before we bought it. Now they know what the brand is; it has consumer drive.”

Most recently, the company donated plants to the Chicago Flower & Garden Show to be featured in William Moss’ exhibit ([www.getoutandgrow.org](http://www.getoutandgrow.org)). This was the perfect opportunity for attendees to stop and learn more about Midwest Groundcovers and the Hocus Pocus brand.

Check out the Hocus Pocus website at [www.hocuspocusgroundcovers.com](http://www.hocuspocusgroundcovers.com) and Natural Garden Natives at [www.naturalgardennatives.com](http://www.naturalgardennatives.com).

### TIME TO CELEBRATE!

This year commemorates Midwest Groundcovers 50th year in business, and they are taking this opportunity to celebrate their work, their employees, their partnerships with customers and their plants.

Earlier this year, they hosted an event with the Illinois Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects. Last month, they held an open house at their Michigan nursery where they organized bus tours from St. Charles to Michigan.

This month, they’ll be hosting an open house at their St. Charles location and visitors will be able to take a bus to tour their Illinois locations.

Midwest Groundcovers will also be celebrating year-round through its newsletters, which go out to about 2,500 customers. From its first weekly newsletter in January and through the rest of the year, the company is reflecting on what makes them special: their amazing

plants. They put together a list of “50 Fundamental Plants” that are exceptional for their durability, beauty and ability to perform. Each week, one of these plants is highlighted in the newsletter — which has an incredibly impressive 35% open rate!

To learn more about their 50 Fundamental Plants, you can access their newsletter archives at [www.midwestgroundcovers.com/Newsletter-Archives](http://www.midwestgroundcovers.com/Newsletter-Archives). ■



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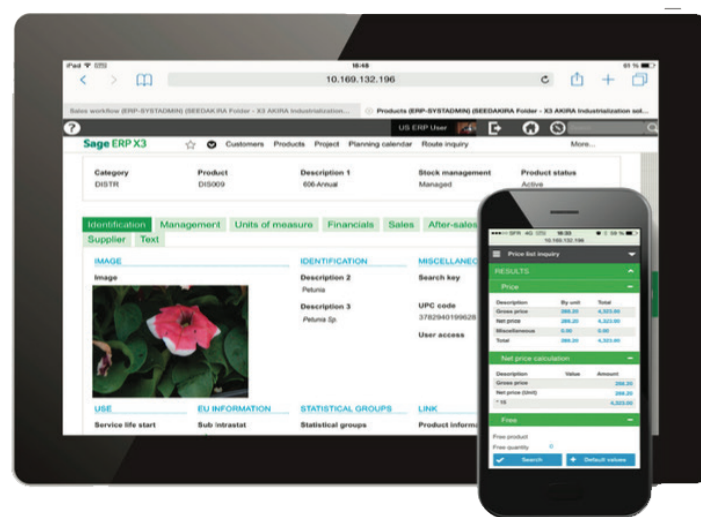
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