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Point of Interest

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BY KRISTY ROBINSON HORINE

Lexington, KY – Ken Van Wingerden can remember when his father tied wooden blocks to the tractor pedals just so the young boy could work in the family business. “We started working at 4 or 5 years old, doing beneficial things,” he said. “Dad allowed us to play, but we learned the value of work.”

Van Wingerden and his brother, Art, own Color Point, a bedding plant greenhouse located in Bourbon County between the four- and five-mile markers on Cane Ridge Road. The family values of work done well, perseverance, wisdom with ethical and efficient business practices and a generosity of heart have contributed to the success of the entire Van Wingerden family of gardeners.

Aart Van Wingerden, Ken’s father, immigrated to the United States from Holland after World War II. He and his wife, Cora, had three children at the time, no job, spoke no English, and yet, they found opportunity to prosper.

The elder Van Wingerden grew the most common plants, like marigolds or petunias, and sold them on street corners in the New Jersey area. Eventually he built wooden huts for greenhouses that were about 5 feet tall, 300 feet long and 20 feet wide.

As the business grew, so did the family. In all, the Van Wingerdens had 16 children, including four girls and 12 boys. Ken Van Wingerden, Color Point’s co-owner, is the youngest.

“We had a natural workforce: children,” he said with a laugh.

With such a large, determined family, the company quickly grew. Most plants were sold through independent garden centers in the beginning, supplied by greenhouses such as the Van Wingerden business. The family not only supplied

plants to these centers, but they also sold them out of their own facility. Then came the big-box retailers.

Stores such as K-Mart, Woolworth's and a host of grocery chains began purchasing plants to sell in their garden centers. Not long after that, home improvement stores such as Lowe's and Home Depot also increased their sales base to include plants and gardening supplies.

The Van Wingerdens took their cue from this explosion of growth and found innovative ways to meet consumer demands.

"All 16 of us are involved in the growing business in some way," Ken Van Wingerden said. "I have siblings who work with seeds and cuttings, facilities and building greenhouses, even automation in the greenhouse business."

Bourbon County was chosen for Color Point because this was one part of the country where there was a need, he added. Ken and Art Van Wingerden had previously owned and sold two greenhouses in Maryland and Delaware, then started looking at the Lexington, Louisville and Cincinnati areas.

"Bourbon County was by far the most receptive to the greenhouse business, knowing it would contribute to local business and commerce," Ken Van Wingerden said. "We understood what kind of facility we were going to have here, and the people in Bourbon County were very open, friendly and welcoming."

Even though a great amount of rolling hills needed to be leveled in order to build, the Van Wingerdens' plans and determination were even greater.

The birth of Color Point

According to Craig Daniel, Color Point's production and purchasing director, the company began its Bourbon County business in 2001 with three acres of greenhouses.

"It was a lot of hard work in the beginning. There were a few of us, and it was a very demanding job," Daniel said. "For me, [the schedule] was 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., six days a week, for a few years. We wore a lot of hats just to make it work. In 2007, or 2008, we were able to step back and breathe a bit."

Despite the long hours, Daniel said he enjoyed the process, getting the plants from the greenhouse to a finished-out size of what people want. There were no major unexpected hurdles, and Daniel said that only a few minor tweaks to certain processes have helped increase on-site efficiency.

Over the years, the business has grown from five acres to 14 acres of greenhouse space, with an additional six acres of new construction slated to receive plants by spring. Daniel said they produce annuals, along with poinsettias and mums, which are purchased wholesale by companies such as Lowe's stores and Sam's Clubs across Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio.

“We are production-oriented, so we are always looking for varieties that can flower together faster, with less disease, less insect pressure,” Daniel said. “We try to get things in and out as quickly as we can and still provide a nice product for the customer.”

Color Point employs 60 full-time workers, with a seasonal workforce that can reach 175 people, providing a boost to the local economy.

“We work with millions of plants,” Ken Van Wingerden said. “If you can keep that amount of plants alive, you are doing well.”

The production process

“The reality is that we start growing for spring now. You can’t just make plants; you’ve got to schedule them,” Daniel said. “For spring, we start planning in July and August and we work it all the way through until May. In another month, we’ll start planting for poinsettias and mums again.”

Since plants are grown most of the year, the greenhouse has to be set up to run efficiently, Daniel said, utilizing space for three major areas: production, greenhouse and shipping.

Color Point receives plastic flats filled with unrooted cuttings, or URCs, from breeders in and out of the United States. In the soil barn, the plant medium, or peat moss, arrives in compressed bales of 110 cubic feet. A machine augers the compressed medium, adds perlite, lime and gypsum and fluffs it. From there, the medium takes a conveyor belt journey into a large hopper, which is then fed into one of three lines, where the medium either stays the same, or has PH added, according to what each plant needs.

Employees fill containers with medium and send them to another set of employees, who transfer plants from flats to larger containers. From there, the potted plants move into large, heated bays in the greenhouse.

“The greenhouse is all environment-controlled [by computer],” Daniel said. “We just tell the computer what we want, and the computer takes care of it.”

Containers are watered in one of three ways: the ebb-and-flood system, which allows water to rise through pipes in the concrete floor and flood the plants for a pre-determined amount of time; a misting of water delivered through a boom system; or watering through a sprayer triggered by hanging baskets. From there, nature takes its course.

Each plant is grown to a specified height, either naturally or by tricking the plant into a growth or blooming stage by manipulating light and dark conditions using black cloth. Employees then load the ready plants onto metal carts for shipping.

Growth spurs efficiency

Daniel gestured with his hand at the Quonset huts, the original five acres of greenhouse space, then turned toward the new construction.

“That’s what happens when you grow – you need to become more efficient,” Daniel said. “When you’re smaller, you just have to make things work.”

With the new construction, the greenhouse will move from four shipping docks to 12, add another line to production and offer more space for the growing process. The new addition of greenhouses will have slightly wider bays and roll-up sides, allowing for more ventilation. Daniel said that as they have added on, they have learned to add, modify, or remove processes or equipment.

“We try to make sure everything is safe and that no one gets hurt,” Daniel said. “And that it’s functional.”

The greenhouse system runs efficiently as a self-contained unit. Water run-off is collected and piped to a holding pond on the property. The pond is used to water the plants, with excess water returned to the pond. Boilers on the property run on recycled automotive oil and heat the pond water, which is pumped into a series of pipes to maintain climate control when needed.

While some greenhouses have become fully automated, Ken Van Wingerden said he is not looking to eliminate the workforce, even though about 30 percent of the company cost is found in labor. His answer to an increased consumer demand of reasonably priced products is more space to make the business organized and efficient.

“Every company has to be improving every year,” he said. “Status quo is not any good, and we are constantly trying to maximize space. At \$20 per square foot cost to build, that is important.”

He said that consumers drive products, prices and demands, and while the business tries to remain competitive and run with the highest efficiency, the family also realizes that they have to look at a broader picture.

More than just a greenhouse

The Van Wingerden family believes in what their patriarch called the “Generator Philosophy.”

“We generate funds to help people other than ourselves,” Ken said. “We try to help out. It’s part of our life’s calling.”

In the 1970s, Aart began looking outside of his own borders and started Double Harvest, a 501c(3) non-profit organization that believes in “sowing the seeds of life.”

According to their website, www.doubleharvest.org, the company “operates in third world countries to establish and develop agricultural projects by providing capital resources and implementing best practices to increase food production and to build the local economy.”

Double Harvest has helped indigenous peoples in the Congo, Indonesia, Honduras, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Kenya, the Sudan, and Zimbabwe learn how and what to plant and grow in their regions, how to sell what they have made, and how to thrive physically, emotionally, and spiritually. In addition to agricultural and aquaculture (fish farming) endeavors, Double Harvest also builds homes, establishes schools and medical clinics, and builds churches in these regions.

“The Lord has blessed us with as much as possible. God has given us the ability and resources and talents, and the glory ultimately goes to him,” Ken Van Wingerden said. “We just do what we can to help others out.”

And it looks like the Van Wingerden family will continue with that philosophy, as there are 117 grandchildren who are already learning the family business. That is room to grow.

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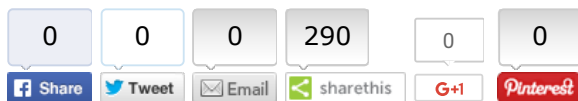
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