The Best of Both Worlds

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Joe wants to open his own business.

After graduating with a degree in horticulture, Joe earned 10 years of experience with a large big box grower. He’s gained more knowledge than he could’ve hoped for and has really enjoyed his job, but lately, he’s been feeling the itch.

Joe and his new wife have been talking about opening their own garden center. At first it was just some pie-in-the-sky chatter over dinner, but now the talk has turned serious … serious enough to research small business loans. They decide to take the plunge. And Joe doesn’t just want to be a “grower”—he wants to sell what he grows himself. He knows what type of greenhouses provide the best environment for crop production, but he and the missus also need a structure for retail—one that’s attractive to the consumer, yet provides a good setting for the plants. It needs to accommodate many customers at once because spring tends to be temperamental in their neck of the woods. And he doesn’t want the production greenhouse too far from the retail area.

Can he grow and sell in the same house?

Joe needs some advice.

A “new” type of grower

Luckily, there are people that can help our friend Joe. Greenhouse manufacturers within the industry have built their businesses on helping growers choose the best facilities that provide for the highest-quality plants. A majority of them also offer structures for garden center retailers. Recently though, they’ve found that many of their new—and even existing—grower or retailer customers have merged into one.

“There has been a trend of growers now retailing and that’s been a sign of the times,” said Chuck Sierke, national sales manager for Belgian-based company, DeForche Construct. “Let’s just say you’re a mid- to small-sized nursery. You’ve always been able to grow 1,000 geraniums and you’ve grown poinsettias and you do your mums and all that. Well, the big guys now basically dominate that wholesale market, so you’re almost being forced to reset your vision on survival. Instead of selling a mum for $2.00 wholesale, you can grow it, bring it up front, and sell it for $4.00 or $6.00.”

Harnois Greenhouses located in Quebec, Canada, has provided commercial growers and garden centers with greenhouse facilities since 1965, but Caroline Forest, VP of communications and marketing, says they’ve definitely noticed an uptick in grower/retailer customers during the last five years. “I think that it’s out of necessity for bringing in more profits,” she explained.

Sure, money is a driving factor, but another reason could simply be that these new Gen X growers are just looking for a new challenge. “I mean, who wants to work for somebody else their whole life?” said Chuck. “Now, they’ve got the knowledge and the confidence level because they’ve been growing plants for the big guy. And after a while, they want to do their own thing.”

Room for one

It would be nice—especially for his pocketbook—but Joe knows you can’t truly grow and sell out of the same greenhouse. There are too many differing factors between plants and people; it only takes one tiny detail to affect the “comfort level” of either one of them.

“You definitely have two distinct types of facilities that are designed for each category,” Chuck said. “So if you’re a grower, your primary concern is to grow the best plant you can grow. If you’re a retailer, you want to sell those plants that have been grown by the grower and you want to be able to keep the customers in the store longer, so you have to provide a very comfortable environment for the customer.”

The key to this is compromise, says Caroline. But this can be tricky.

“It’s a challenge because a structure that’s geared toward retailing is different; it doesn’t have the same specifications or the same characteristics as one that is mainly going to be used for growing,” she said. “You’ve got to have a structure that’s going to be versatile, allows you to grow healthy crops, and still be attractive enough that you’re able to retail from it. When it was completely divided, it was easy.”

But it’s not an impossible situation. For companies like Harnois and DeForche to continue to serve a changing industry, they’ve developed ways to help grower/retailers wear both hats.

Construction junction

So, Joe has the funds ready and the land picked out. Which type of structures will provide the best opportunities for him to develop a successful business?
Chuck says the first thing you have to look at is the type of crops you’re growing. If Joe is growing annuals that have different stages of production from propagation to finish, his growing facilities should have zones that allow his staff to grow and move product to the retail area smoothly and efficiently.

The ideal scenario is building gutter-connected houses together for production and then adding a different type of structure for the retail area either in the front or to the side. This way, Joe can easily control the different zones for temperature, etc. so he can focus on the plants. Plus, he doesn’t have to worry about aisle widths and traffic flow if he keeps the production area separate.

Why so much focus on the “growing” greenhouses?

“Obviously, I think the growing needs are always going to be treated as a priority because if you don’t have a good crop to sell, your retail part is not going to be successful,” says Caroline. “It starts with a great plant, so first you’ve got to have the good growing conditions. And then you make compromises. The retail facility might not be fully designed to be as effective as a place that would be solely dedicated to retailing, but you’re going to get benefits from both sides. It’s trying to get the best of both worlds.”

But that doesn’t mean the retail area takes a complete back seat to the production area. After all, this is the place where the profits come from. Yes, Joe needs to build a sturdy, efficient growing facility, but if he’s selling his beautiful, high-quality plants out of an old lopsided shed, a truly successful business may be hard to come by.

“In the retail area, we do a lot of cool stuff with the powder coating of the steel to offer different colors for the garden center,” said Chuck. “And another nice thing we do is curved trusses that create a cathedral-type of effect inside. So you can really blow people away in your retail area. You want people to stay in the store longer and you want them to be comfortable so that they’ll buy more.”

“But it depends on the grower’s budget, but it’s possible to get really good curb appeal no matter what you’ve done,” said Caroline. “It’s really a question of cost and energy efficiency, so it depends. If you can afford it, people associate glass structures with the retail area. It’s the classic look. But there are retail garden centers that are covered in polycarbonate and still have great curb appeal.”

1. House of Perennials in Laval, Quebec, built a wood façade to create a storefront look that offers more curb appeal to their double-poly house.
2. Wilson Farms in Lexington, Massachusetts, constructs a wooden façade that holds squash, pumpkins and gourds for the fall season. It’s functional and fun!
3. Alexa’s Garden Café in Swansons Nursery located in Seattle, Washington, provides their customers with tasty food … and a reason to keep coming back to the store. They promote the café as “taking a break while surrounding yourself with the beauty of the greenhouse.”

Wilson Farms in Lexington, Massachusetts, took this idea a step further with their pumpkin and squash “display.” Granted, it’s in front of a shingled building, but Joe could certainly do something similar to a poly greenhouse if he’s inclined and a little creative. Wilson’s head of advertising Chris Previte told Green Profit’s Ellen Wells that the grid is formed out of clean pine wood apple boxes that hold 211 squashes, pumpkins and gourds. Chris said it’s a nice visual for the customers and it’s a good way to show off Wilson’s large variety, too.

What it really boils down to is what you want to grow and retail, said Chuck. You want your production area to have all of the bells and whistles. And since most retailers don’t just sell plants, you also want your retail area to be big enough to hold the hardgoods and soil and other amenities—and have room for multiple customers to walk and shop. And now, with small cafés becoming a popular attraction in garden centers, Joe wants to have enough room to build something that will keep his customers coming back and hanging around—like Swansons Nursery has done with Alexa’s Garden Café—which can turn into additional sales dollars.

Back to the real world

Okay, so Joe doesn’t really exist, but it’s not like he’s a far-fetched character. There are hundreds of grower/retailers who have worked tirelessly to continue their family business or start up one on their own.

Sebastien Dion was 18 years old when his father André opened Unibroue Brewery. Working for Canadian home improvement chain RONA for 25 years, André wanted to do something different. He always wanted to open his own garden center; however, the lure of the brewery business took his focus off of plants. But in 2004, André and his sons Sebastien and Jean-François sold the brewery and started plans for Ferme Guyon (or, Guyon Farm in English). After traveling to France, England, Ireland and parts of the U.S. for two years, the Dion family felt they had enough ideas and inspiration to break ground on a 27-acre (11-hectare) piece of land in Chambly, 25 minutes from Montreal.
4. Visitors to Ferme Guyon in Chambly, Quebec, can buy their plants and walk through the butterfly house (left), eat and buy groceries (red barn, bottom center), and view the farm animals (top center).

Now, Ferme Guyon is a family destination, not only providing annuals, vegetables and native plants, but guests can eat at the café, shop in the grocery store, buy gourmet cooking ingredients, view the farm animals, take cooking and gardening classes, and stroll through the Papillonnerie to see the 400-plus species of butterflies. It’s a nice change for Sebastien and his family.

“This business is quite different,” said Sebastien, who is general manager. “With the brewery, we had to sell products to the retailer, and then he sold the products to his customers. But now we have the customer right in front of us and it’s interesting.”

It took them eight months to build everything, including the two production and four retail greenhouses from Harnois, plus a small greenhouse for the butterflies. Sebastien says that Harnois provided much-needed advice and was able to construct everything in a very short time.

Since they opened in May 2010—past prime spring season in Quebec—Sebastien considers 2011 as Ferme Guyon’s first full year, which he says was very successful. They will be increasing their production next year and will be opening a farmer’s market in the 200-year-old barn for local farmers to sell fruits and vegetables.

5. Planterra located in West Bloomfield, Michigan, built a new glass greenhouse that not only holds their stock plants, but serves as a showroom and retail area.

6. Planterra’s conservatory-inspired facility now hosts large events like weddings and banquets.

Since 1973, Larry Pliska and his family were running Planterra, their interior landscaping business in West Bloomfield, Michigan, out of wooden-framed glass greenhouses that were built in the 1930s. Larry’s son, Shane, said that over the years it became harder to maintain them and when they started thinking about renovation, the possibility of restoring the old houses was nil.

“So that’s when we decided to build new,” said Shane. “We built the new building next to the old one and that allowed us to move a lot of the legacy plants—collections my dad has gathered over the decades—into the conservatory. That’s really what makes Planterra special. In addition to all sorts of varieties, we have these really, really spectacular plants that aren’t commercially grown anywhere.”

Planterra’s new glass greenhouses from DeForche, complete with real gold finials, not only hold stock plants, but serve as a showroom and retail operation for their products that adorn office buildings, hospitals and shopping centers. This area, which they call “Center Court,” also allows for the Pliskas to bring in additional revenue by renting out the space for weddings and banquets.

Shane laughs and says, “We built a greenhouse that was so nice that it was almost too nice for plants, and people wanted to get married inside of it.”

Shane says that the new facility was inspired by classic botanic conservatories, which not only provides charm, but function. Planterra brings in most of its products from other suppliers, but they needed a place where they could acclimate their plants onsite.

“We are not a traditional grower, however, it would be wrong to say that we don’t grow anything,” said Shane. “It’s always been my dad’s dream to operate the business in a building that would be similar to a botanical garden.” GT