

Blooming Big

Seville Farms Finds a Niche in the Nursery Industry



Photos by Janet Hunter

Brothers Billy, left, and Bobby Brentlinger run Seville Farms, headquartered south of Fort Worth, Texas.

Gardening and landscaping are two of Milton Kasper's favorite pastimes. So it's not surprising that the Lone Star Ag Credit branch president enjoys visiting nurseries and garden centers.

What he likes more than discovering a new landscape specimen, though, is finding plants that were grown by one of his biggest customers, Seville Farms of Lillian, Texas.

"It gives me a thrill to go into a major retailer and pick up a plant that has the Seville label on it. I always show it to my daughter and tell her, 'The Land Bank is partly responsible for this plant being here,'" he says.

Kasper has good reason to be proud of Seville Farms, a Lone Star Ag Credit customer since 2000.

The nursery was established with a \$140,000 investment by brothers Billy and Bobby Brentlinger and two business partners in 1993.

Filling a Niche for Big Chain Stores

Seeing that The Home Depot did not have a regular source of perennials, they approached the giant retailer in 1994 and pledged to fill that niche. A few months later, they promised Wal-Mart the same.

The idea worked.

Today, Seville Farms is the No. 1 perennial grower in Texas, providing perennials, annuals, forced bulbs, herbs and groundcovers to the major big box stores. Its customers include Home Depot, Lowe's, Wal-Mart, H-E-B, Albertson's and Calloway's Nursery, as well as landscape contractors and independent garden centers.

Not surprisingly, the company now sells more products in one week than it sold during its entire first year of operation.

"What we've done is we've learned how to provide a perennial to the vendor while it is in bloom," says Billy, the company's president and finance whiz. Bloom, he notes, can significantly impact sales.

But there's more to this success story than the businessman-come-horticulturalist admits.

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Growing a Business, Not Just Plants

Seville's relationships with the retail giants quickly grew beyond supplying them with products. "The box stores are so big that they can't manage the nursery needs of all of their retail outlets," Billy says.

As a result, Seville established a third-party business, Quick Turn Merchandising, to handle merchandising in 167 Wal-Mart stores, 163 Lowe's garden centers and a large number of Home Depot stores. Paid by the retailer, Quick Turn is responsible for ordering merchandise, setting up displays and tracking inventory of Seville plant products. At Lowe's, Seville employees are located in the stores full time so they can closely manage the live plant products.

In the nursery industry, distribution and timing are critical to delivering healthy, fresh products to the retailer. Because plants cannot tolerate a road-trip beyond two days, Seville's market is limited to Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma and New Mexico.



Plants are tagged by employees in the staging and shipping center. At peak periods, Seville Farms and its sister companies employ up to 1,200 people.

Maximizing Distribution Revenue

A few years ago, however, Seville Farms developed a new way to improve efficiency and maximize distribution revenue. Capitalizing on this idea, in 2007 they established GardenReady Solutions, LLC, a third-party logistics company, to handle transportation of live plants. Truckloads of plants from across the country — tropicals, annuals and nursery stock — arrive daily at Seville's staging and loading facilities south of Fort Worth. There, the company combines them with products from other growers and ships them to designated stores, not unlike any large regional or national freight company would.

Through GardenReady Solutions, Seville helps live-goods growers across the country

meet the logistical challenge of delivering their product to the retailer on time and in the right quantity. Within the next year or so, the company plans to establish regional distribution centers, where truckloads of plants can be assembled closer to their final destinations.

"There's a lot of wasted money in logistics in our industry," says Bobby, who oversees the distribution arm of the company. "We're trying to get the industry to convert to a single-rack system for transporting plants."

Investing in New Product Lines

Along the way, Seville Farms has made a number of other key business decisions that have clearly contributed to their success. For instance, Bobby, a construction genius,



Milton Kasper, center, Cleburne branch president of Lone Star Ag Credit, visits with Billy, left, and Bobby Brentlinger. Seville Farms owns 1 million square feet of greenhouse space and contracts 1 million square feet.

has directed the installation of the farm's irrigation systems and the construction of 1 million square feet of owned greenhouse space and roads.

Three years ago, when looking for an industry-specific software solution for production, sales and merchandising, the company management liked the Advanced Grower Solutions product so well that they purchased part-ownership in the company.

And five years ago, Seville Farms started another division, Integrated Botanics, which produces more than 400 varieties of plugs and quality young plants.

"Innovation and customer service have driven our growth," Billy says. "Now, new product lines are allowing us to reach a broader customer base."

Among these new lines are hard-to-grow items and what Billy calls "the impulse items" — plants like Calla lilies and kangaroo paws, or Anigozanthos, an Australian plant that Seville recently introduced to its affiliated retailers.

"There are people who have more and more disposable income, and they are willing to try something different," he observes.

The company is continually assessing new plants and new varieties of traditional plants in its own perennial trials, but before

an item can be added to Seville's plant list, it must meet these conditions:

- The plant breeder has to be able to produce it
- Seville must be able to grow it en masse in the greenhouse
- It must have long shelf life in the store
- It must sell in the store

To evaluate how new plants will perform in a retail setting, Seville Farms is currently establishing a garden-center environment at the farm that will replicate conditions in a store.

Staying on the Cutting Edge

With such high standards and innovative programs, it is no wonder that Seville Farms rang up \$16.5 million in plant sales in 2006 and projects \$21 million in sales for 2007 — triple the company's 2000 sales volume.

But Billy is quick to credit Lone Star Ag Credit for the financing cooperative's role in Seville's success. The company has greenhouse and real estate loans as well as a seven-figure line of credit with Lone Star, and uses Lone Star's latest cash management product, known as AgSweep.

"There are a few weeks every year in which we receive a million dollars in checks that pay the note down. AgSweep is perfect for



Photo courtesy of Ball Horticultural Company

Going Greener

Seville Farms has joined a movement within the cut-flower and potted-plant industry to go "green" — or greener in their case.

"We're moving to become a sustainable company and pushing our growers now to do so, too," says Billy Brentlinger, company president. "We plan to become a certified sustainable grower by 2008."

For Seville Farms, sustainable production means marketing the plants in biodegradable pots that can be planted directly into the ground (pictured above), avoiding agrochemicals and practicing energy efficiency, for example. Research is under way to also develop biodegradable flats for carrying plants.

Visit www.scs certified.com for information about the VeriFlora™ sustainability certification program.

us because it allows us to scan the checks, and then Wachovia deposits the funds in our account the same day," says Billy, who participated in the 2006 Tenth Farm Credit District Young Leaders Program.

Working with Lone Star allows them to do business with the same lender their parents chose to finance their farming operation, while at the same time enjoying sophisticated cash management products that will keep their business growing for years to come. ■ JH