

UP & Coming Businesses

BY JENNIFER DUFFIELD WHITE

Four
businesses
to watch and
learn from

For 13 years, we've been identifying up-and-coming businesses—from wholesale growers to retailers—who've found their own formulas for success. Some command giant sales volumes; others maintain a tiny seasonal retail growing operation in a rural corner. No matter, they have figured out what works for them, and they've generally had the foresight to change with the times.

We honor these Up & Comers each year partly to recognize them for their efforts and partly to share their experiences with you, our readers.

Approaching 2009, though, has brought an onslaught of questions for so many businesses in our industry; it has also elicited innovative brainstorming and analysis on the state of the industry. Which is to say ... this year's list of Up & Comers has a different feel. In a sense, the nominations we received included businesses that nominators identified as being able to weather some severe storms, or as having niches that will succeed in today's climate.

We included, for the first time ever, a breeder/researcher on that list: GardenGenetics. And then there's Walker Farm, a plant lover's paradise whose owners certainly struggled, like so many of you, when they first started out, but who've keyed in on a combination of flowers and vegetables that gave them their best year ever last year. Down in Texas, Spring Creek Growers uses Christmas tree sales to bridge the cash-flow gap that cripples so many greenhouses each winter. And in Georgia, a vibrant couple of horticulture graduates continue to invest in their perennial liner business, James Greenhouses, looking at lean flow, among other things, to keep them on the cutting edge.

Each of these businesses is unique in its own respect, yet you'll also find a few unifying principles—the same principles that are being reiterated over and over in the pages of this magazine as the keys to doing business in this ever-changing marketplace: efficiency, communication across the supply chain, diversity, careful variety selection and a strong identity (or, if you will, a strong story) that's communicated to their customers.



Photo: Walker Farm

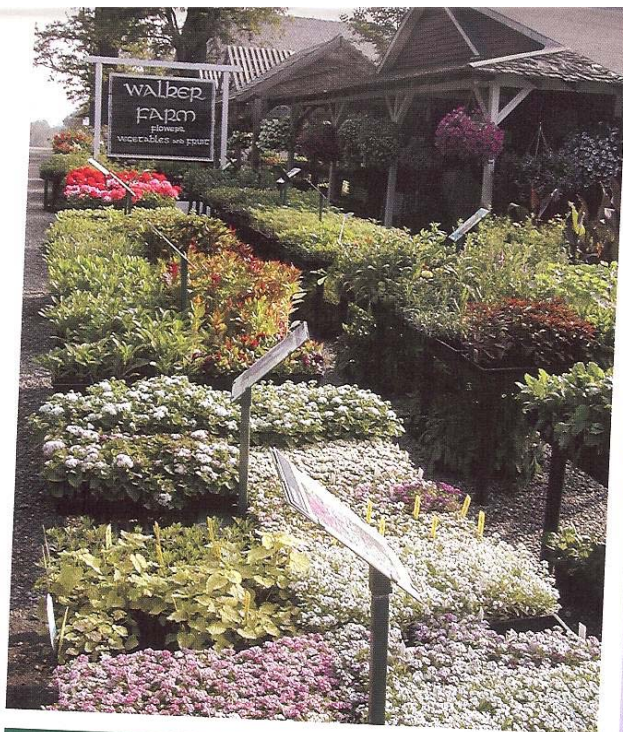
WALKER FARM

From the periphery, you might consider them a throwback of days gone by: Walker Farm's 200-year history; its quaint location in Dummerston, Vermont; a farm stand; a sampling of odd plant varieties you've never seen before; a harvest dinner on the calendar; and word-of-mouth advertising. Yet, those details are exactly what have built Walker Farm's reputation and ensured their success.

When you consider the predictions that consumers are trending towards wanting a deeper relationship with the products they buy and wanting an experience, coupled with a growing eco-consciousness, Walker Farm has set itself up to deliver just that.

Jack and Karen Manix set down roots on his grandfather's farm in 1973, growing vegetables, raising livestock and finally coming into their own as a business when





Pictured bottom left and above:
Retail, field vegetable
production and greenhouse ornamental
production all have a place at Walker Farm.

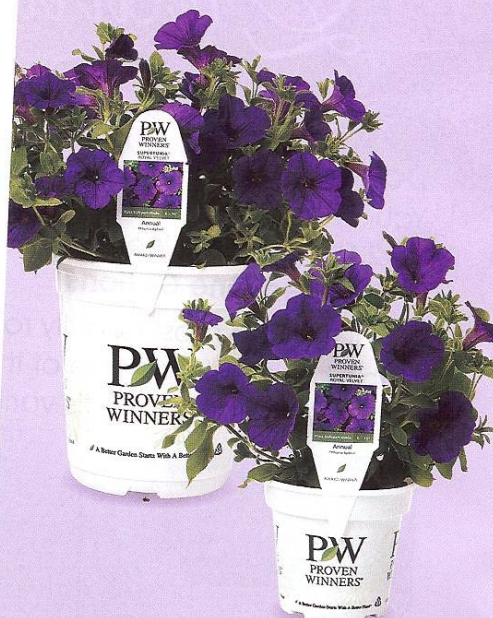
Pictured right: Walker Farm grows their own
certified organic veggies, and sales are up.



they began selling flowers. Part of the success of Walker Farm as we know it today—part garden center, part farm stand—is the high density of educated gardening clientele and the luck of having a number of well-known garden writers who they've developed relationships with over the years, including Jamaica Kincaid and Tasha Tudor. Writers brought strange and unusual seeds for them to grow out, and their collection expanded. "Our customers feed us with what they want and we grow it," says Jack, noting that this continued close relationship with customers is the key to their success.

They grow some 1200 varieties of annuals and perennials, plus a bounty of heirloom vegetables. Today, they produce all of their vegetables certified organic. Some are sold as vegetable bedding plants; and some are grown in the field, harvested, and sold through their farmstand—a venture that ensures customer visits right through the fall. For Walker Farm, the vegetable side has become an increasingly important to their success. The combination of the economy, food safety issues and a growing number of people striving to eat "local" has created a mini frenzy. Last year they anticipated that vegetable sales would go up, and they increased production accordingly. "We sold out," says Jack. "We had the best year we've ever had." In particular, they saw a huge influx in

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young people coming in to buy plants for their first gardens. They've paid special attention to this group, making sure that they set them up to be successful with good advice and educational offerings. "That's our customer for the next 30 years," stresses Jack.

The Manix family is also working hard to keep the younger generations happy in the workplace. Their daughter Kristin has already become an essential element to managing the retail area, and their son Dustin, while currently working for a nursery on the West Coast, expects to return to the family operation. In addition, "We have a great group of young people working for us," explains Jack. This year, in an effort to keep them working when the rest of the farm is closed for the winter, they started a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, where customers buy shares to receive a portion of the harvest. Winter harvest? In Vermont? They've had success growing greens in unheated greenhouses. So for a low operation cost, they're keeping valuable employees, giving them marketing experience and maintaining a connection to customers in the winter months. (They won't be doing a CSA during the summer, since they have their farm stand operation then.)

As for advertising, other than letting people know they're open, they don't spend money on traditional print or radio ads. "We're more into creating buzz through word of mouth and special events," explains Jack. Giving gift certificates to charity events, for example, works as a marketing tool, and, "it's working, in the long run, in maintaining our image," they reason.



GARDENGENETICS ✓

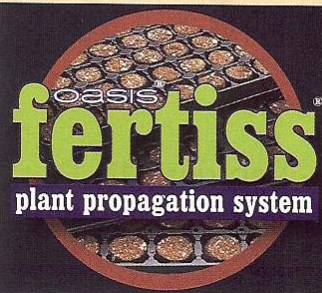
GardenGenetics' niche falls outside of our normal Up & Comers base of retailers and wholesale growers. However, in an economic climate that's forcing everyone to look at the entire supply chain and evaluate varieties more closely than ever before, we felt it was apropos to include an up-and-coming breeding company on our list this year. In fact, in an era of consolidation, it's rare to even have an upstart company of this nature.

Veteran plant breeders Mike Uchneat and Rick Grazzini came together recently to form GardenGenetics, beginning work on their 20-acre Centre County, Pennsylvania farm in the fall of 2007. Their new 20,000 sq. ft.-Nexus greenhouse became fully operational in June 2008, offering a combination of plant breeding and contract research.

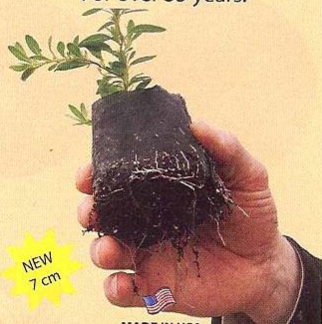
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