

# Family Matters

Bob's Market & Greenhouses in Mason, W.Va., has **six strong reasons** to look forward to the future: Five sons who make up the operation's second generation of management, and a knack for diversification that keeps everyone on their toes.

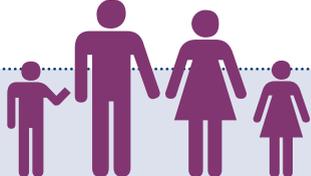
**By Jasmina Radjevic**

**M**any of you may be familiar with Bob's Market & Greenhouses, one of the industry's premier grower-retailers, based in Mason, W.Va. You may know that this business is owned and operated by the Barnitz family and is currently in its second generation of ownership. Robert Barnitz Sr., who started the business in 1970 has since handed most of the responsibilities down to his five sons, Bobby, Rick, Scott, Jeff and John, who themselves have children who will one day take over the business.

However, aside from the family succession aspect of the business, Bob's Market has become a unique player in the industry thanks to its ability to keep up with industry trends. Robert Barnitz and family have learned how to adapt to constant change — in the economy, the horticulture industry and retail as a whole. This industry is about color and style and consumer preference, and through diversification, the Barnitz family has remained successful and continues to find ways to evolve.

## History in the Making

Bob's Market started out as a retail location in 1970, where Robert and his wife, Corena, sold fresh produce, garden vegetables and bedding plants. In 1981, they expanded the wholesale business and began selling plants to businesses into the Carolinas. In the mid-'80s, the Barnitz family expanded the retail business by adding satellite locations.



## A True Family Business

Running a family business has its challenges, but ultimately, the family's commitment keeps them focused on the future growth and success of Bob's Market. As with every other aspect of the business, simplicity is key. Because there are five brothers, each sticks to his specialty and has unique responsibilities:

Bobby oversees the production side of things. Scott manages the retail operations along with the retail managers. John heads up the finished-product loading and shipping. Rick is the head grower. Jeff is in charge of the trucking, transportation and greenhouse construction.

Looking to the future, the Barnitz family is preparing for the third generation to get involved in the business. One thing they are focusing on, says Bobby, is giving their children the same work ethic he and his brothers grew up with.

Although brothers will be brothers, they take the business seriously. "We have board meetings and discuss current issues and future growth," explains Bobby. Communication can be a challenge, he says, but "it is rewarding working together."

During this time, they established a Southern customer base for the wholesale growing operation, Bobby explains, and this allowed them to grow an early crop. It wasn't until 1988 that they began growing fall pansies. "That was the first big step in diversification," he adds. The fall pansy market was new to the industry at the time, but Barnitz took advantage of the booming trend.

At the time, "box stores weren't handling pansies," explains Bobby. "And the more Northern growers didn't realize that there was a market. We already had the market established because that's where our wholesale business is... So we rode that wave until we hit a pinnacle."

And this is exactly why they continue to seek opportunities in diversification — the pansy market helped the Barnitzes build additional greenhouses the first 10 years, until plugs kicked in.

Becoming a plug producer for Ball Seed was next. It's no surprise Bob's Market gained Ball's interest: "Our sales reps would come in. They knew what they were selling, and they'd see what we were growing," says Bobby. By 1996, when the Barnitz family was approached by Ball Seed, Bob's Market was no longer a small producer; they had been growing their own plugs for in-house use since 1985.

They decided to go into business with Ball exclusively for ease of business and because of their relationship with their Ball sales rep. It's a true partnership, says Robert, and business for Bob's Market has only picked up since then. "For that first year, we did 3.5 million spring plugs. Twelve years later, we did 88 million spring plugs," shares Bobby.

The plug business has grown quite rapidly in the past decade. "And part of that [growth] is gathering new customers," says Bobby. "The other part is having a large customer like a Bell Nursery and having them grow as rapidly as they have."



*Top: Each member of the Barnitz family specializes in a different aspect of the business.*

*Bottom: Bobby says moving into the fall pansy market was the first step to diversification.*

However, the diversification did not stop at plug production: In the spring of 2006, Bob's Market became a rooting station for Dümmer, and naturally that business has grown as well.

### Overcoming Challenges

Of course, all these advancements didn't come so easily. There were hurdles along the way. According to Robert, "the No. 1 factor is the weather." Last year, it was the problem associated with water restrictions in the Southeast.

The water restrictions that hit Atlanta — one of Bob's Market's major sales areas — caused about 20

percent shrinkage for the business, says Robert.

"The problem was when the water restrictions hit, we were already done transplanting," says Bobby. "We actually grew 5,000 flats for a Georgia grower, who we have historically sold several thousand flats throughout the years. He hit a certain week where he just couldn't physically grow enough product, so he asked us to grow 5,000 plants... We finished planting the day before the restrictions kicked in, and we had 5,000 flats that he never took a flat of. We tried to sell to other places, and we did OK, but in turn, as we were selling some of that product, we ▶

# Hail to the Chief

Not only is Bobby Barnitz vice president and plug business manager for Bob's Market; he is also the president of OFA — an Association of Floriculture Professionals. Get a glimpse into his involvement with the industry's leading educational association.

## How did you get involved with OFA?

"We have always attended Short Course, and as the years progressed, the nominations committee had mentioned my dad's name as a possible person to serve on the board. Dad was called and asked to do that. And he said, 'No, but Bobby will do it!' So I was asked to run for the board of directors. I ran three times before I was ever elected."

## What kept you involved?

"All of us in the industry have a passion for it. But once you become more involved in OFA, I can't say that you develop more of a passion, but you get a better understanding for the industry. And with that understanding, you become more involved."

## How have you benefited from your participation?

"It's been beneficial both for me personally and absolutely for the business. The Short Course is known for all the networking opportunities and meeting people. Becoming involved in the board of directors and the leadership role has opened up opportunities to meet people that may know our name or I may know their name, but we never established that opportunity to build a relationship or network together. We've picked up business opportunities through the years. It helps you meet people. We might be competitors in one way, but we're friends in another way, or we could be customers in another way."

## Would you advise others to get involved with OFA?

"Absolutely, either with OFA or if they have state organizations or associations they can become involved with. If you have a passion for the industry you're in, become involved."

probably lost sale on some of our 804-cell packs that we would have sold to garden centers."

If there's one thing the Barnitz family has realized through the years, it's that you live and learn. You must adapt to change and take with you lessons from the hardships and apply them to future endeavors.

Most recently, a hurricane that hit Texas in 2008 hurt business for Bob's Market. "We have five customers in Greenville and Spartanburg, S.C., and when the hurricane hit, they had to shut down some refineries," explains Bobby. There is a major pipeline that runs through Georgia and South Carolina, and this caused gas shortages. This could have affected the mindset of the consumer, Bobby says, on what they could purchase in September 2008. "So out of those five customers in Greenville or Spartanburg, they're down compared to last year's business."

But Bobby remains optimistic, especially at such a crucial time of the year. The holiday season was just around the corner when *Big Grower* stopped in to visit Bob's Market. Thanksgiving and Christmas were approaching soon after the rough fall season. "Once Thanksgiving comes, the mindset is poinsettias and Christmas trees. People aren't in the yard planting," he says. "Actually, [the first week of November 2008] was our second biggest shipping week of the whole fall."

One of the key elements of their diversified business is learning to grow items for different seasons of the year. There is always something in the works in the greenhouse, be it early spring crops, fall pansies, poinsettias or plugs.

## Key to Diversification: Simplicity!

Robert Barnitz credits the success and growth of his business to three key elements: quality, customer service and business integrity. It seems easy enough, but managing growth while staying true to these fundamentals can become an issue. Through their business relationships and practices, it is easy to see these three elements come into play. The main tactic is simplicity. And the results don't lie: Bob's Market has quadrupled in size in 12 years, going from 4 acres to 17!

According to Bobby, simplifying business through all channels is key. The Ball Seed relationship is a perfect example. Bob's Market chose to deal with Ball exclusively because they wanted simplicity, not dealing with multiple brokers. "Keep life as simple as you can," states Bobby.

Because of this arrangement, they do not deal directly with the box stores. "We started out in the beginning with independent garden centers, who pay when we deliver. That's always been our philosophy. We like that direct business with the customer, who can give you a lot of feedback now." ♦

# Bob's Market & Greenhouses — At a Glance

**Location:** Growing facilities in Mason, W.Va., and retail locations in West Virginia and Ohio

**Growing size:** 17 acres

**Employees:** Fluctuates between 110 and 120, but increases to 230 at peak

**Sales area:** Mostly East Coast and some of Midwest — New Jersey west to Indiana, and south to Georgia

**Annual revenue breakdown:** 60 percent young plant production, 20 percent wholesale finished production, 20 percent retail

**Fun fact:** Some of Bob's Market's varieties have been featured at Disney World, the Pentagon and even the White House!

Although Bob's Market doesn't directly sell to boxes, some of their product does eventually end up in big box stores. Customers such as Bell Nursery supply Home Depot and other similar chains.

The Barnitz family is able to build these relationships with their customers through consistency of product quality and delivery. They keep a shipping journal, explains Bobby, of when finished trucks go out.

"There have been times when a truck was having problems, and instead of being there at 8 tomorrow morning, it was 4 in the afternoon," says Bobby. "But that is still 24-hour service — if the customer calls and we get the product to them within a day."

To be able to deliver to all customers, big and small, Bob's Market uses various sizes of vehicles, from sprinter vans to tractor-trailers. About 98 percent of the plug business is delivered on trucks, and the vans deliver to small accounts.

There may have been times they have made extra trips for themselves, sending one truck to a destination half full when they could have created another route for that truck, explains Bobby. But in order to maintain quality, they chose not to because that truck would have to stay overnight and plants would be in the dark during that time. Using different types of vehicles helps them cater to each of their customers.

There have been entire seasons where they have not had a late delivery. "You pamper your customers," Bobby says. "We're doing all we can do for our wholesale customers, our plug customers, whoever that may be."

## Raising the Standards

The question many growers ask themselves is, "How can we get more for our product?" The Barnitz answer is simple: Don't cheat on the inputs.

"As an industry, we're fighting for discretionary dollars from the consumer," says Bobby. "How do we get a higher percentage of that?" Start with younger generations, he says. The key is to find a different way to approach these customers, first through education and by changing their mindset. Gardening might be work, he says, but it can be therapeutic as well. There's a lot of enjoyment — we just have to show them by raising the standards.

Some growers are in a rush to fill the order up and forget about plant quality, but Bob's Market has a track record of 99.8 percent order fulfillment, says Robert. And not only that, but order fulfillment on the week customers wanted it. But growers who are in a rush as soon as spring hits can damage plant quality and ultimately hurt the industry as a whole, he adds. He has seen growers who start rolling racks of hanging baskets into the garden center the weekend after Mother's Day. "That plant material should never have come out of the greenhouse!" he stresses. "It could be regular begonias, impatiens — whatever — and they put a \$3.88 price on it... It is hurting the market."

Robert says people often ask him to define quality, and he can't give a definite answer. For him, "it looks better, it's healthier, it's fully grown and the color is outstanding."

Bobby adds, "You achieve that by not cutting back on your input costs. Do what is required to make the best product." ■

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