

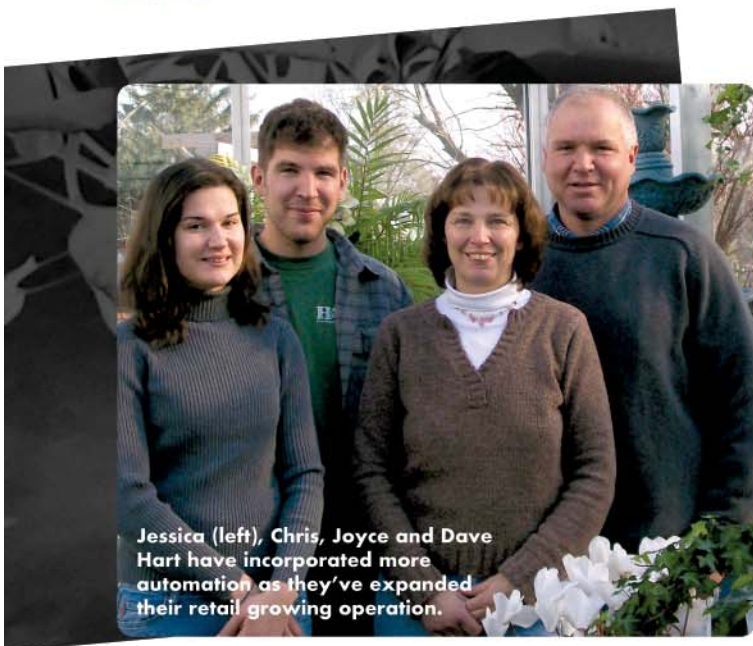
Hart's is equipped

By David Kuack

This Connecticut operation's size hasn't deterred investment in automation.

Company plans to meet demand
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Jessica (left), Chris, Joyce and Dave Hart have incorporated more automation as they've expanded their retail growing operation.

Dave and Joyce Hart, owners of Hart's Greenhouse & Florist LLC in Canterbury, Conn., have come a long way from selling a few flats of leftover tomato plants to a local hardware store. They now operate three retail garden centers and have expanded production facilities to grow for their own stores.

From vegetables to flowers

The Harts started their greenhouse business in 1982 as an offshoot of their vegetable field production on 20 acres rented from the state.

"We were buying in all of our vegetable transplants and looking for ways to cut corners," Dave said. He built a 4-by-15-foot cold frame made from windows he purchased from an old mill. He filled the cold frame with horse manure to generate heat. They produced 30-40 flats of tomato plants, which at the time seemed like a "huge" crop, he said.

The Harts had 10 tomato flats that they didn't plant so they sold them to a hardware store.

"The store bought them for \$3 a flat," Dave said. "We made \$30. We thought we were rich having made that much money on a few tomato plants we grew in a cold frame. Based on that sale, we decided to expand."

In 1983, after expanding their production greenhouse, the Harts added flowering plants to their product mix. That same year they also expanded their family with the addition of their twins, Christopher and Jessica.

Finding financing

The Harts moved to their current Canterbury location in 1985. They knew that if they were going to be serious about retailing plants, then they had to find a location near a main road.

The Harts said they experienced some hard times from 1988-1990. One of their major problems was obtaining financing.

"Everything we did was with Farmers Home," Dave said. "We bought our home and first equipment through

to grow

Hart's Greenhouse & Florist LLC

Founded: April 1982 by Dave and Joyce Hart.

Locations: Two greenhouse production facilities in Canterbury, Conn.; three retail garden center stores in Canterbury, Brooklyn and Norwich, Conn.

Size: Canterbury retail location has 30,000 square feet of production space; Canterbury production facility has 50,000 square feet of greenhouse space and 6 acres of outdoor production.

Crops: Bedding plants, perennials, flowering potted plants, vegetables, herbs and rose bushes.

Customer base: Retail through their own garden centers to a customer base from Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, within a 40-mile radius.

Employees: 20 full time, 40 seasonal.

Farmers Home. This government program rarely had money available for farmers except for home financing. They didn't have a program for operating money, and that is what we needed."

Because the Harts didn't have a lot of equity, most lenders didn't want to deal with them. In 1991, the Harts received a \$15,000 line of credit from Farm Credit that was guaranteed through Farmers Home.

The Harts bought \$15,000 worth of plant material for their greenhouses, sold it and paid back the debt. "When we finally got a lending institution that would support us and believe in us, that's when our business really took off," Dave said. "Farm Credit is now our partner. It really does take money to make money."

Money talks

Once the Harts were able to get financing, they achieved a feeling of comfort.

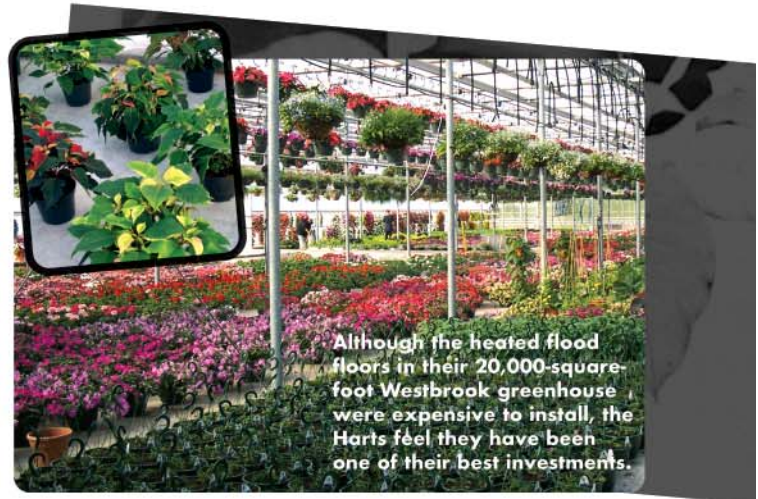
"We were able to buy more product so we could offer a more diverse line of plants as well as fancier containers," Dave said.

The Harts also added more greenhouses for production and retail. They purchased a second retail location in Brooklyn, Conn., in 1997. The site, located on one of the city's main roads, had been a motel. The Harts tore it down and put up a greenhouse and sales room that opened in spring 1998.

"Once we opened the Brooklyn store, we had more buying power," Joyce said. "We were buying for two stores. We needed more of everything so our pricing was lower. We also were able to move product around so this allowed us to be more versatile."

Need for more greenhouse space

With the addition of the second garden center, the Harts maxed out the 30,000 square feet of greenhouse production space in Canterbury. In 1998 the Harts bought a second property in Canterbury to expand their greenhouse production. Initially they put up a few quon-



Although the heated flood floors in their 20,000-square-foot Westbrook greenhouse were expensive to install, the Harts feel they have been one of their best investments.

set houses and grew some outdoor garden mums to supply their Brooklyn store.

"At about this time we started getting more interested in mechanization," Dave said. "In the early '90s two of the world's largest casinos opened within 20 minutes of us. There are so many of the local people who work there that we just couldn't compete. We pay about the same wage, \$10-\$12 an hour. But they offer good benefits and the jobs are less labor intensive and the buildings are air-conditioned."

The first piece of equipment the Harts purchased was a Gleason flat filler. Ever since, the Harts have looked for ways to make work easier and more efficient.

"That (flat filler) cost us \$7,000. We had people who worked for us who thought we were crazy," Dave said. "They asked why would we spend that kind of money when they could do the same job by hand. The payback for that flat filler was easily during the first year."

Four years later the Harts added a Rapid Transplanter. "Our very best [human] transplanter could hand-transplant 14 1020 flats in an hour on a good day," Dave said. "Again, our workers gave us flack when we spent



Operating three garden centers has increased the Harts' buying power and offered them the flexibility of moving product between stores.

\$24,000 for the transplanter, which we saw at a trade show. The transplanter enabled us to do 200 flats an hour."

One lesson that Dave quickly learned with the transplanter was the need to have a full plug flat for the transplanter to be most effective.

"When we transplanted manually, germination rate was not a big concern because the seedlings were transplanted by hand," Dave said. "But you need 100-percent germination when transplanting plugs. We bought in some plug trays and ran them through the transplanter. It was like magic. Now we pay a little more for full trays, and it's well worth it."

The Harts have added a Visser PC-9 transplanter, which is more versatile and can transplant any size plug tray and vegetative cuttings.

"With the Visser transplanter, which we saw at the NTV show in Holland, we can do hanging baskets and mixed containers, too," Dave said. "The transplanter is always here, it always works and it never has a bad day. It makes everyone work faster. And everyone likes the fast pace part of it. There's no slow period, no down time."

The Harts have gone back to Holland several times and have added equipment including a Visser pot destacker, Kase soil mixer and peat moss bale breaker, a Rapid tagger and an Echo hanging basket irrigation system.

"The only piece of equipment we don't use that often is the tagger," Dave said. "We don't run thousands of flats of say, Super Elfin Red impatiens, at one time. We might do 200 flats and then have to change the tag. It's just easier to do it by hand."

Adding production space

After purchasing their second Canterbury location, the Harts were ready to start adding production space. They put up a 20,000-square-foot Westbrook greenhouse

in 2000. Part of the money came from a farm-enhancement program grant provided by the state.

"We figured we could build the greenhouse for about \$80,000, but it actually took \$100,000," Joyce said.

One thing that Dave wanted in this new greenhouse was some type of bottom heat.

"We had become more experienced growing plants and knew what we needed to do," he said. "We had had a lot of problems growing New Guinea impatiens and Nonstop begonias. I wanted some type of bottom heat."

Once Dave and Joyce decided on heated flood floors they contacted Trueleaf Technologies.

"Initially, Jim Rearden at Trueleaf was a little apprehensive about working with us because of our size. He was concerned that the cost per square foot would be too high for us," Dave said. "It wasn't cheap. It cost us nearly \$300,000 for the heat and the floor. Just like the flat filler and transplanters, the bottom heat and flood floors were well worth the cost. It was truly the best thing that we have ever done."

After the floors were installed, the Harts saw dramatic improvement in the growth of geranium, New Guinea impatiens and begonia rooted cuttings they were finishing. The results were so good that the Harts installed GTI watering booms in two of the zones and began to root their own cuttings.

"There's no *Botrytis*. There's very little fungus gnat problems because the top of the growing medium remains dry," Dave said.

"Every single plant looks good," Joyce said. "The plants all look the same and there are very few losses."

Sold on retail

After adding the greenhouse space, the Harts looked for ways to keep the facility full as much as possible.

"We started a prefinished program through a broker producing some 10-inch baskets and 4-inch material,"

Second generation prepares Hart's for future growth

Dave and Joyce Hart are proud that their children Chris and Jessica have decided to join them in their business, Hart's Greenhouse & Florist.

"If it wasn't for our kids, we would have eventually been looking to sell the business," Dave said. "Joyce and I would have probably run the business for another 10 years and then we'd have cashed out. They are so interested in the business and that's why we went ahead and added the Norwich store. We would have never done that if our kids weren't so into the business. Our kids have taken so much pressure off of us."

Chris and Jessica want to keep the business growing, and that includes eventually consolidating production to one of two Canterbury locations.

"We would prefer to grow everything ourselves, but it's not like we have to have the additional greenhouse space," Dave said. "We know enough growers in the Northeast that we could buy plant material and keep our stores full. We'll see how the economy goes and how the business grows for us. We have to know that the market is there that our retail can support our current production."

Dave said. "We did that for three years, but stopped after 2005 because we weren't making money and because it interfered with our own retail business.

"We're retail growers. Even though the wholesale business was growing for us, there just wasn't any profit for us. We're used to dealing with dollars rather than pennies. It's hard for us to wholesale a 10-inch hanging basket for \$9 when we know that we can get \$24.99 for it retail."

The Harts opened their third retail store in Norwich, Conn., in

Marketing poses challenges

Joyce and Dave Hart, owners of Hart's Greenhouse & Florist LLC in Canterbury, Conn., grow plants for their three retail locations. Joyce said that while the plant production part has become much easier, selling and marketing their products to consumers has become more challenging. This year, Hart's will produce plants in 4½- and 6-inch and 1-gallon branded Poppelmann pots. "We think it is important to get our name out there along with our brand more so than someone else's," Dave said. "We will use our logo on everything but the Proven Winners plants. We do use the PW pots."

April 2005. They consider this store, managed by their daughter Jessica, to be their dream garden center. The store has a 12,000-square-foot Nexus atrium glass greenhouse with an attached 5,000-square-foot sales room along with a sales yard.

The Harts feel that they timed the opening of the Norwich store well. There is no other garden center in the area.

"The town of Norwich is going through a renaissance or rebirth," Dave said. "We have gotten the city to sign up to participate in this year's America in Bloom program. We're heading up the city's involvement. We've met with the mayor and got him on board and with the city's public works department. We are getting people involved. I think this will be a very good way for us to market ourselves and our plants."

◆ **For more:** Hart's Greenhouse & Florist LLC, Route 14, P.O. Box Canterbury, CT 06331; (860) 546-6541; fax (860) 546-2069; daveandjoyce@hartsgreenhouseflorist.com; www.hartsgreenhouseflorist.com. 