

# An expansion that worked

By Carol Miller



## 8 years after redefining itself, Bucks Country Gardens has few regrets

**D**uring most of the 1990s, Tom Hebel, owner of Bucks Country Gardens in Doylestown, Pa., dreamed about a bigger, better garden center. He toured garden centers around the country and made a trip to England to see stores.

It's not an uncommon dream. A lot of retailers prepare to take the risk of expanding their space and building new structures that fit every desire they've ever had for their stores.

Hebel followed through on his gamble, and it was worth the risk.

"Over the past eight years, retail income has increased over 240 percent," Hebel said.

In 1999 the garden center doubled the building size from 9,000 square feet to just over 18,000 square feet, Hebel said.

"The original garden shop, which became the gift shop, is the only part of the old garden center that remained," he said. "In addition to a 60-car paved parking lot, the garden center expansion included a large warehouse, a barn-style

## Bucks Country Gardens

**Location:** Doylestown, Pa.

**Owner:** Tom Hebel.

**Sales.** 1999: \$1,896,000. 2006: \$4,554,000.

**Categories:** Furniture, home decor, plants, gifts and holiday.

**Size:** 35 acres. Parking lot holds 60 cars.

**Important dates:** 1961, company founded under the name Royer Nurseries, owned by C.R. Royer. Tom Hebel joined the company in 1981 and became a partner in 1986. The business moved to its present location in the same town in 1984. Hebel became sole owner in 1993 and changed the name to Bucks Country Gardens in 1994.

## Bucks preserved its sense of history

Bucks Country Gardens was careful to retain its historical character when it rebuilt.

"There is a farmhouse built [on the property] in 1820, an architecturally significant barn with fancy cupola. And we thought that was part of the image of who we were and who we wanted to be," owner Tom Hebel said.

Hebel worked with Nexus Corp. to design a greenhouse that echoed the "fancy cupola," which is in fact a clerestory. A clerestory looks like a cupola, but has windows on all four sides which allow light to illuminate the interior.

Nexus also designed a true clerestory that closely matched the barn for Bucks' main building.

(See image, opposite page)

garden shop, a gutter-connected greenhouse, a covered perimeter canopy and expansive outside plant display yard."

### Backed into a corner

By the time Hebel rebuilt his buildings and redesigned the store's traffic flow, he'd been backed into a corner, retail wise.

"When you start out, you don't have money and you make decisions based on that. I'm not sure they are situations that can be avoided," he said.

He had a 3,000-square-foot building that worked well for him, despite its small footprint. To make up for that lack of space, he'd added a 3,000-square-foot unfinished and unheated pole barn and a 1,000-square-foot fertilizer shed. The problem with the secondary buildings was not their size, but their shape.

Both buildings were long and rectangular. Hebel found it almost impossible to create a traffic flow that wouldn't force

customers to double back a few times. The hoop house where Bucks sold its plants was another long, narrow, 3,000-square-foot space.

But Bucks was located on 35 acres, which allowed Hebel to plan for change.

Since the store was popular with customers, he knew that whatever he did, he'd need to maintain his garden center's personality.

"We always had a really comfortable feel. No matter how small or how frugal we had to be with what we created, we were always able to create a comfortable experience. Even with a hoop house, we filled it with great product. We overcame the limitations of the building. It was very much a business we were very proud of," Hebel said.

So, Hebel packed his wish list of more space, better traffic flow and maintaining his store's personality and set off to tour garden centers.

"We went to England. Obviously we

Photo courtesy of Nexus Corp.



All customers see the home decor and furniture department since it's at the front near the entrance. The categories are big performers for the garden center.



When he contracted Nexus Corp. to build his retail structures, Hebel rejected having greenhouses dominate.



## Furniture, decor are a core business

Bucks Country Gardens in Doylestown, Pa., is unusual in that 35 percent of its annual volume stems from casual furniture, home decor and holiday goods.

"In 2006, our traditional departments — greenhouse, nursery and garden supplies — each represented about 21 percent of our volume," Hebel said. Although not specifically by intent, our garden center activity is now almost equally balanced by the five major departments."

Hebel attributes much of his store's financial growth since doubling his space in 1999 to these categories. Before the rebuild, he didn't sell furniture at all, and the other categories were minimal.

Inventory control in the categories is a challenge. "The hard goods — home decor and Christmas — are so stylized, if you make a bad buying decision, you're stuck. That's a lesson I still haven't been able to learn. If someone asked what was our biggest issue five years ago, it was labor. Now our biggest challenge is the concept of inventory control — what do you do with product you aren't able to sell?"

Hebel changed his point-of-sale system for the sole purpose of better retail management. "We want our system to tell us not only what we have and what we sold, but how long it will last," he said.

were filled with all kind of ideas; it kind of locked the deal for us. At that point in time, we knew we couldn't do everything we wanted to do. We couldn't be a destination with what we had," Hebel said.

### How Bucks budgeted for the rebuild

Hebel had a simple approach to finances. "What can I afford to pay?" he said. "From that point I worked backwards."

He consulted his accountant and his banker. The "what can we afford" figure was a lump sum, a monthly payment figure. "We basically did a cash-flow analysis; we decided we can afford a monthly payment of I think it was \$15,000."

The anticipated growth in sales was much higher than what was budgeted. Each year the company has grown, except for 2007 (so far). Hebel projects that poor weather will cause a 2.5-percent drop in gross sales.

"We usually have a double-digit [percentage growth in gross sales] followed by a single-digit. We've even generated a 20-percent increase," Hebel said.

### Zoning headaches

That bane of expanding garden centers, zoning, was the main impediment Hebel faced when he started building.

When Hebel and his former partner first built on the location in the early 1980s, they built in a R1 residential zoning area. Since town supervisors thought a garden center was a good use for the

land, they signed a waiver for Bucks Country Gardens.

That was in the 1980s. A new group of supervisors was in place in the late 1990s and wanted to clean up the township and zoning violations. When Hebel began building, he received a cease-and-desist letter telling him he could no longer operate in violation of his zoning.

Hebel found the original drawing with all the former supervisors' signatures on it approving his garden center being built in the location. Luckily, the new supervisors accepted the signatures. But in their eyes, the zoning problem still had to be resolved for Bucks to continue operating.

"We literally rewrote the ordinance to allow us to be in this township. They gave us a new classification — horticultural center — that allows us to be in residential zoning. Horticultural centers have to have a minimum of 25 acres, with 1,000 feet of road frontage, be located on a major highway. There were probably only three or four properties that comply, and we were one of them," Hebel said.

The zoning rule effectively limited competition for the garden center. And the community had changed over the last 20 years, making the township ideal for a destination garden center.

"The demographic changes we have seen here in southeast Pennsylvania have turned this once-agricultural-based area into a bedroom community of young pro-



The clerestory on the 19th century barn is architecturally distinct, and Bucks Country Gardens owner Tom Hebel wanted to keep it intact and part of his store's image.

fessionals,” Hebel said. “Our surrounding townships, Buckingham, Plumstead and Hilltown, have been amongst the fastest growing in the state over the last 10 years. We now cater to a customer with more sophisticated taste and the income to back it up. Much of the new housing in our area is in the \$750,000 and up range, and our customers are more interested in what they want, not necessarily how much it costs.”

### Mistakes made, and decisions that worked

Hebel recalled the mistakes he made, along with some smart ideas.

#### Mistakes

**First mistake.** “What was immediately apparent to me was a lack of true greenhouse space. I can’t imagine another garden center owner who would do that. My background is in landscape design instead of growing,” Hebel said.

“We built this whole structure, but ended up with about 2,700 square feet of traditional greenhouse. It’s funny, but no one has ever come to me and said, ‘Why didn’t you build more greenhouse space?’ I

didn’t think I need it. Maybe that’s why we focus on home décor and furniture.

“So what did I do last year? Built a 6,000-square-foot greenhouse atrium to the side. We can sell annuals, Christmas and furniture,” he said.

**Second mistake.** “In the long run, I guess I was a little optimistic at the rate of speed I thought I could [rebuild],” Hebel said. “Everybody does that. Don’t set a must-open-by date. You can’t make things happen just because you want to.”

**Third mistake.** “We changed who we are and what our customers knew us to be,” Hebel said. “They were asking us ‘What are you doing? I used to have such a good time. Now you’ve built this monstrosity.’

“We were so small before, so intimate, people thought it was theirs. We looked different, felt different. The interior was now 30 feet high, and it used to be 8 feet tall. We struggled with that. How do we make this facility feel like us? Anytime you have a brand-new facility, it’s not going to be you right away, and I see it any time I travel and see that proven with these brand-new facilities.”

**Fourth mistake.** “The canopy was not

as effective as I thought it would be,” Hebel said. “It was exposed and not deep enough for protection. We’ve added rolling doors so that the space is as much inside now as it is outside. And we replaced part of it with the new greenhouse.”

#### What Bucks did right

**First smart idea.** “I think we did build the right size. Even though we’re so much bigger than what we were, it wasn’t completely overwhelming and sterile,” Hebel said.

“We’ll continue to change it. What it enabled us to do is to go deeper into the non-green [categories]. The gift/home décor and furniture worked out better than I thought.”

**Second smart idea.** “I have all my retail staff office space in the garden center. [Before] we had to have offices in a leased building, which was just terrible,” Hebel said. “If you are greenhouse manager, your office is in the greenhouse. The furniture manager’s is in the furniture department.”

**For more:** Bucks Country Gardens, (215) 766-7800; [www.buckscountrygardens.com](http://www.buckscountrygardens.com).

