

# Leading By Kelli Rodda by example

Peace Tree Farm is taking its environmental message to the consumer.

“Now I’ve been happy lately, thinking about the good things to come. And I believe it could be, something good has begun.” Cat Stevens sang those words in the 1970s about a peace train. It’s a song that comes to my mind after meet-

ing Lloyd and Candy Traven, owners of Peace Tree Farm in Kintnersville, Pa. Maybe it’s the married couple’s business name, or maybe it’s the couple’s devotion to environmentalism, a cause they’ve

## Peace Tree Farm

**Founded:** In 1983 by Lloyd and Candy Traven.

**Location:** Kintnersville, Pa.

**Crops:** Herbs, vegetables, specialty annuals, begonias and poinsettias, from plugs up to finished plants.

**Production space:** 60,000 square feet.

**Market:** Finished plants are sold to destination garden centers, botanical gardens and museums throughout the Eastern United States. Young plants are sold nationwide.

**Employees:** Four full time, two part time year-round and up to 10 seasonal.

**Sustainability highlights:** USDA certified organic herbs and vegetables; biodegradable pots; compost tea; plastic recycling; biocontrols for diseases; and beneficial insects for pest control.





believed in for decades. The lyrics seem to fit them. “Oh peace train sounding louder, glide on the peace train.”

The Travens have a message and it’s about to get louder. This spring Peace Tree Farm is launching a new plant program called One Earth. And it embodies their beliefs of producing chemical-free plants that are beneficial to the body, the mind, the spirit and the environment.

One Earth Edibles include herbs and vegetables. Its tagline, Good for the environment, good for your family, is a statement the Travens steadfastly support.

One Earth Foliage and One Earth Flowers are accompanied by a similar tagline – Good for the environment, beautiful in your landscape. The tags are from MasterTag.

“Plants are for the health of the world. I truly believe that,” Candy said. “We often think we’re the ‘green’ industry simply because we grow plants. But the industry is starting to pay more attention to the environment by recycling plastics, reducing pesticides and reducing water.”

Besides the environmental benefits, sustainability offers economic advantages.

“Being sustainable is economical. If you’re saving water, tightening up the greenhouse, reducing pesticide applications, then you’re saving money and making an environmental impact,” she said.

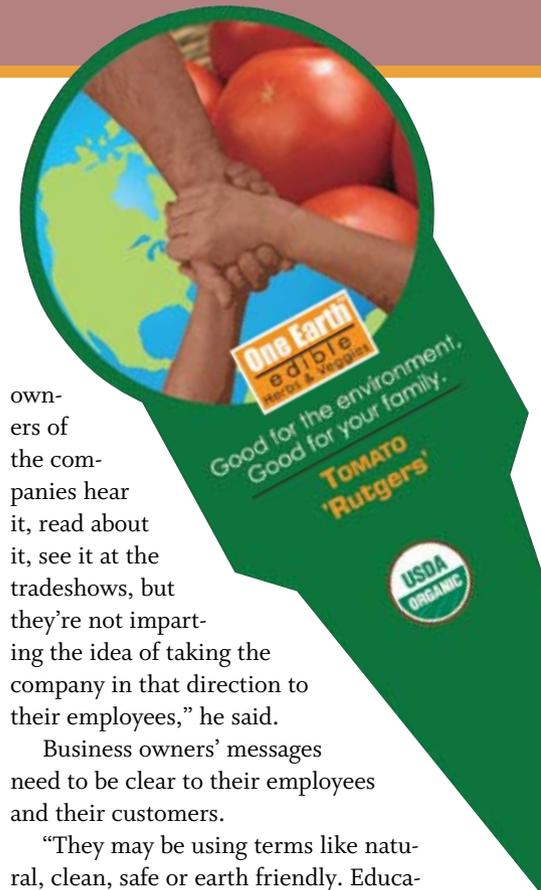
### Clear and simple

The One Earth marketing program will be aimed at destination garden centers to market themselves and sustainably grown plants.

“We’re selling sustainability,” Lloyd said. “I don’t like the term very much. It has a lot of relevance to growers, but the retail buyer doesn’t really know what it means. Most consumers are convinced it means organic, chemical free and biodegradable, which of course is not true.”

But the Travens are determined to educate the public and the retail garden centers about sustainability.

“The retail buyers hear the term, the



owners of the companies hear it, read about it, see it at the tradeshow, but they’re not imparting the idea of taking the company in that direction to their employees,” he said.

Business owners’ messages need to be clear to their employees and their customers.

“They may be using terms like natural, clean, safe or earth friendly. Education is a huge part of our marketing. We have to educate our customer and make sure they clearly pass on that message to the consumer.”

A value statement must accompany a sustainability message to drive home the point and to educate consumers.

“Right now the box stores are cleaning our clocks on this issue and most of the independents are not doing enough, if anything, to get the message to their customers. Why are Home Depot and Walmart doing it? Because it makes money.

“The market part of sustainability is being driven by two different ends of the spectrum: the low-end with Walmart and the higher end with Whole Foods. But stores in the middle aren’t doing anything, and that’s where growers and independents should step in.”

The message has to perpetuate throughout the distribution chain, starting with the grower, continuing with the retailer and ending with the consumer.

“I sell sustainably grown and certified organically grown and chemical-free plants. The retailers need to tell their customers, ‘We’re buying these types of plants for you.’”

The One Earth program is designed to speak to the retailer and the consumer with a clear message, she said.

## Equipment tweaks keep rice pots running through machines

Peace Tree Farm uses biodegradable eco360 rice pots from Summit Plastic in tandem with an extensive production line made up of AgriNomix equipment. When owner Lloyd Traven made the switch from plastic pots, he knew it wouldn't be a seamless transition.

He loaded up the pot dispenser in the back of his truck and drove to Oberlin, Ohio, to meet with an AgriNomix engineer.

"We worked and tweaked until we

got the machine to dispense the rice pots flawlessly," Traven said. "We had this machine working better on rice pots than on plastic pots."

Switching to rice pots was part of the Travens' principle of growing plants sustainably.

"We like them a lot," he said. "They're not really much more expensive than using a plastic pot, and it sends a very clear message — much clearer than saying 'recycle your plastic.'"

"The colors are bright and we tried to keep the logo and the tags simple," Candy said. "I think the Baby Boomers will relate because it's the same message that was part of our childhood."

### A positive message

Although the term sustainability may be vague, in general it's a positive message. If Lloyd had to wrap up the term in

a concise phrase he'd say, "Take care of your people, the environment, the product and the customer."

It's a positive concept that the green industry needs to push and sell, he said.

"Sustainability as a concept gets growers to look at their operation from the top down. It's about what you should be doing, unlike organic production which is a long list of what you can't do and

use," he said.

But the sustainability message has been clouded with certification, he said.

"Sustainability is a positive message, but it's now become a certification requirement for large growers," he said. "Most of these growers are getting Veri-Flora certified to service box stores, especially Walmart. If the consumer smells 'greenwash,' that's an absolute death sentence for those of us who believe in and practice sustainability."

Since Peace Tree Farm specializes in herbs, both young plants and finished material, it made sense to obtain USDA organic certification, which officially occurred in February.

"We elected to go with organic certification with herbs and vegetables because we believe there is a purpose, a real good reason for doing it," he said.

Consumers are beginning to take notice of USDA certified organic stamps.

"I think long term it will be a market requirement, so being USDA certified organic will give us a significant compet-

itive advantage over our competition.”

### The mechanics of organics

While Peace Tree Farm’s herbs and vegetables are USDA certified organic, the Travens use the same methods and inputs for growing flowers. Everything is OMRI- (Organic Materials Review Institute) certified — a commercially prepared growing media, fertilizers, compounds for pest control (including beneficial insects) and Rootshield for disease control.

But it’s a tedious process.

“Every production decision we make creates five questions that could affect the organic process. Everything we do is likely to change something,” Lloyd said.

For instance, the Travens have an extensive AgriNomix potting line that uses vertical bale towers.

“I’m not giving up this machine, so I have to find organic soil that comes in tower bales,” he said.

**For more:** Peace Tree Farm, (610) 847-8152; [www.peacetreefarm.com](http://www.peacetreefarm.com). 

## It’s a bug-eat-bug greenhouse

Peace Tree Farms uses a variety of beneficial insects for pest control. Owners Lloyd and Candy Traven release *Hypoaspis miles*, *Orius insidiosus* and *Amblyseius cucumeris*, *A. swirskii*, *Phytoseiulus persimilis*, *Encarsia formosa*, *Eretmocerus eremicus*, *Aphidius colemani*, *Eretmocerus eremicus*, *Atheta coriaria* and *Steinernema feltiae*. General manager Joe Volpe is in charge of the biocontrol program. Their primary source for beneficials is Biobest Biological Systems in Canada.

The beneficials cost between ½ cent and 1 cent per square foot per week, Lloyd said. Because they use no chemical sprays, a tremendous number of natural predators find their way inside the greenhouses, including hover flies and lacewings.

The Travens worked with IPM Labs in Locke, N.Y. on a new program against thrips. This spring they’ll plant marigolds

around the greenhouse, at least 10 feet from the vent intakes, to trap thrips. The plants will be replaced every two weeks.

They also raise cereal aphids on banker plants (monocots) and use ornamental pepper ‘Black Pearl’ as banker plants for Orius and other beneficials.



‘Black Pearl’

Peace Tree Farm has purchased a 500-gallon compost tea brewer from Growing Solutions Inc. The tea will serve as their primary fertilizer source.

“It works by biologically activating what is already in the soil and using it all effectively, efficiently,” Lloyd said. “Our soils all contain a compost element, and the tea ‘activates’ that beautifully. We will supplement with the two Drammatic fertilizers.”

The tea also makes the plants tougher — almost like systemic resistance.

“It’s very effective on diseases, especially powdery mildew and botrytis,” he said.