

**George Lucas (center) relies on key employees Dave Miller (right) and Scott Burger (left) to build greenhouses to his specifications on time.**

# Master Builders

**Lucas Greenhouse in New Jersey has found it pays to have employees dedicated to greenhouse construction.**

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**W**HILE most growers get into the greenhouse business because they love to grow plants, others really take pride in building greenhouses and have dedicated employees and crews.

One prime example is George

Lucas of Lucas Greenhouse in Monroeville, N.J. While he and his wife founded the business with just 9,000 square feet of greenhouse about 30 years ago, today Lucas Greenhouse spans 630,000 square feet and ranks at No. 100 on our Top 100 Growers. The company has undergone three

major buildouts with Nexus Greenhouse Systems since 2002 and just constructed 170,000 square feet of Dual Atrium greenhouses with a glass roof and polycarbonate sides and gables using its own

crews. This summer, Lucas will be adding another 130,000 square feet.

Where is all this growth coming from? Young plants. Forty percent of production is propagation and prefinished plants, and the rest is finished plants sold to independent garden centers within a 150-mile radius. Lucas Greenhouse is a rooting station for Fischer/Syngenta Flowers and also does contract growing for Pleasant View Gardens and Gro 'N' Sell. The



**Mobilizing all materials and equipment in advance makes short work of greenhouse construction, as long as the weather cooperates.**

company also produces its own liners for mums and poinsettias.

"I love to build greenhouses," Lucas says. "I am a builder more than a grower. The projects we have now are

more challenging, a lot more high tech and glass versus plastic. It's challenging but fun."

But as his operation has grown, he can't be as hands-on with every aspect as he used to be. "We're big enough now that I'm stuck in a stinkin' chair in the office all the time," Lucas laughs. "I need people who think like me so that I know the job will be done the way I would do it. The key is having good people. We are very fortunate to have talented people who can build."

## Right Hand Men

The two employees Lucas relies on the most during the construction phase are Dave Miller, who manages all the site work, subcontractors and crews, and Scott Burger, who handles all the electrical, environmental controls and inside mechanical work. "They build the greenhouse and I make it run," Burger says.

Miller worked for Lucas from 1985-1991 and returned in 2002 after running his own landscape company and other ventures. In addition to doing all the site preparation with heavy-duty equipment like backhoes and excavators, he manages the entire greenhouse construction from start to finish and a crew of up to 40 Lucas Greenhouse employees devoted to the job.

"This past year's project started



on Sept. 27 and we put plants in the house on Feb. 4," Lucas says. "Jeff (Warschauer) from Nexus and Levi set the posts with our help. The underground storage tanks for flood water return, the flood floors, most of the pipe work for the heating system and most of the electric was done by outside contractors, but the entire structure was built by our own people. This included the site work needed to build the greenhouse on."

Building projects are timed in between growing cycles and many of the 40 workers are directed from the greenhouse to construction. Most are from Mexico and many of the crew leaders have been with Lucas for 10 years.

"Having our own crews is an advantage," Miller says. "We're able to push the guys more and get the most efficiency. We're able to build something ourselves, take pride and take a closer look. Whatever we build, we have to live with the next 20 years."

There are cost savings, too, Lucas says. "Every time you have an outside contractor, the guys are here for eight weeks. Our guys are already housing and feeding themselves. For us, there's not much down side, and we're able to keep a good work force busy year round."

A typical greenhouse construction



**George Lucas and Dave Miller inspect newly poured concrete before covering in-floor heating with more.**

crew is about eight people, Nexus' Warschauer says. With a crew of 40, Lucas builds in record time. "It normally takes five to six months for a crew of eight. For him it takes less than four months with 30 to 40 people,"



Warschauer says. "They prepare the grounds and pay for the rental equipment. We tell them what they will need – scissor lifts and augers, machines to hoist up trusses. Our crew digs the holes."

### **Choreographing Construction**

All the parts are ordered and delivered before construction begins. The most crucial factors are weather and supplies of materials coming in. "Once we ran out of gutters and had to move the crew to another area," Lucas explains. "If we run out of materials, it's my fault, if I don't give suppliers enough time for the parts or they are behind. Either can make a mess out of the plan. I still need to pay the crew."

Miller builds in crews of two, pairing up workers to do 10 to 15 jobs at the same time. "One pair sets posts, one does trusses versus everyone doing the same task at one time," Miller says. "This keeps everyone pushing together. It doesn't take long to get ahead, but if the materials are wrong or the measurements are wrong, that will bring things to a halt."

Burger is amazed at how much the

crew can accomplish in a single day. "They build greenhouses so fast, before I know it, it's six o'clock at night and I've got to put a motor in," he says. "I try to work with Dave's guys so they're not putting stuff in my way."

Miller says he always has to be thinking five or six days ahead and anticipating what can and can't be placed where. He also needs to have extra jobs in his pocket to keep people moving all the time.

"The most challenging part is bringing the right people together with the

same personality and work ethic," Miller says. "You can have a great game plan, but if you don't have good people, you can't do it. George has put a great responsibility on me to get these projects done and gives me the luxury of handling things the way I want to handle them. We're alike in that we will work 14 hours a day, but not everyone has the same ambition. So we keep it fun and interesting for the guys and make it enjoyable, so they will want to do it again. We keep a light atmosphere."

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