

James Greenhouse's young, passionate team helps the operation stay flexible with orders and produce consistently high-quality liners.

# New Perspectives In A Traditional Industry

Greenhouse Grower's Operation of the Year winners Ken and Leah James reveal how James Greenhouses came from humble beginnings to take the perennial plug market by storm.

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**L**OOKING at most of the greenhouse operations in the industry, it may seem like having a long line of growers in the family is a requirement. If so, Greenhouse Grower's Operation of the Year winners Ken and Leah James of James

Greenhouses are breaking the tradition. With hard work, an eye for opportunity and insights from industry professionals, this young couple has grown a first-generation business from two workers (themselves) in 1998 to 36 dedicated employees today. The Jameses see both the pros and cons of being newcomers.

"It's a challenge. It really is. We just don't have that depth of experience to draw on. Even though our customers and our suppliers are certainly the best in the world, in my opinion, we just don't have that innate knowledge of the industry and how things work. We have made some really expensive mistakes along the way," Ken says.

"But on the other hand, I look at it as an asset because we have always had a very open mind about production methodologies, product lines and costs," he says. "We try not to get caught up in thinking that we know how things are supposed to be done because this is the way we have always done them."



## A Guy, A Girl And A Greenhouse

Producing approximately 14 million vegetative liners per year, James Greenhouses serves a wide range of customers from major operations to mom-and-pop growers in the U.S., Canada and as far as Bermuda, but the story of how the two came to own their own greenhouse begins at the University of Georgia where Ken and Leah met.

The two were horticulture students, with Ken studying golf course management and Leah focusing on floriculture.

Ken ultimately decided his passion was ornamentals and "left the turf and grass thing behind." Although he always had the goal of being self-employed, he gained experience working for container and perennial grower Iverson Perennials Gardens. It was there that Ken began thinking, based on the vegetative materials the operation received and produced, there was room for another supplier in the southeast.

"I decided that was what I wanted to do," Ken says. "I had always loved propagation in school, and I focused on that specialty as being a niche opportunity in the marketplace."

Ken left Iverson Perennials and moved closer to home to work at Saul Nurseries in Atlanta, Ga. While working there for a year, he did research and looked at property on which to begin his own greenhouse company. Leah and Ken were dating at the time, but

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Leah concentrated on her own career. She came into the picture as Ken was looking at property.

"One day he just asked me, 'Will you do this with me? Will you work at the greenhouse office?'" Leah says. "And I said, 'Sure,' and from the very beginning we moved out here and started building greenhouses."

### Starting From Scratch

The first summer, Ken and Leah lived in a camper on the 70 acres of red-dirt-covered grounds in the Georgia heat. Add to the small home a small business where Ken and Leah worked side-by-side, first dry walling and laying the floor of their office and then sticking cuttings all day, every day for a few years, and it was a tough start.

"Luckily, we just got bigger and bigger so we could divide the responsibilities. If we're together, we will argue about a decision," Leah says. "Now responsibilities are split up enough that we're not directly working together and making the same decisions."

Leah handles the production planning and a lot of the office functions, working closely with the customer service staff. Ken handles the operations side, working closely with the head grower, production manager and shipping manager. Despite relatively smooth sailing now, Ken and Leah agree there was a large learning curve.

**"It's a double-edged sword.** I would say that we would have grown faster and a bit smarter if we had a little more experience, but at the same time, there were probably some decisions we wouldn't have made or some opportunities that we would have passed up because we were too conservative."

- Ken James on being a first-generation operation

"It sounds so mundane but learning how to professionally run an office is a very complicated thing. Taking a college accounting class does not prepare you for that," Ken says. "My idea of human resources when I was in college was that some Fortune 500 company has a human resources manager. Quite frankly, you don't have to get over 10 or 11 employees before you need someone who is dedicated to the cause of hiring and managing all those things that have to do with employing people. There were a lot of hiccups on the business management side."

"We started from scratch and neither of us had any business training. It was all horticultural training. I feel like every step along the way has been a learning experience," Leah says. "How do you go about borrowing money? How do you handle payroll? How do you go about hiring good people? Facility and staff was a big challenge. We're in a good place now, but it was over 13 years of figuring out the right kind of people to hire."

Now the Jameses look to University of Georgia graduates to fill many positions at the greenhouse, and Ken says that some of their best workers come from their alma mater. The former students bring new ideas and zeal to the company. Many of the Jameses prized employees gain experience working in one position and grow into others.

**In a long-established industry, Ken and Leah James stay open-minded about everything from production methods to cost.**



### Getting Help From The Industry

Despite early challenges, the Jameses were fortunate to have entrepreneur family friends and industry professionals to guide them. Ken credits Sam Rizzi, who hired Ken as a straight-from-college graduate for his first job at Iverson Perennials, Lee Tile, whom Ken worked with at Iverson Perennials, Steve McCorkle and Richard and Bobby Saul of Saul Nurseries with being encouraging confidants and friends. Allan Armitage, Ken and Leah's professor at University of Georgia, also played a role in the start of James Greenhouses as a perennial plug producer.

"When we started the business we took our first list of plants that we were going to make into our product offering and went and sat in his office and went down the list and got his opinion on what we should grow and what we shouldn't grow," Leah says.

"Allan Armitage, to this day, is someone I trust completely with business and employee relations and marketing questions. He is a pretty well-rounded person to bounce ideas off of," Ken says.

For Armitage, the feelings of respect are mutual.

"Without a doubt Ken is a terrific plantsman, but he is also very much a perfectionist. He wants to do it right. And he and Leah are an absolute team together," he says.

### Building Customer Confidence With Quality

Starting small, Ken and Leah did much of the footwork to become established within the industry. Drawing on the contacts Ken had made at other nurseries before going out on his own, he and Leah met with potential customers in person.

"We just represented ourselves. There were no brokers. We went and sat in people's offices and talked to them about what

**"The reason I think they won is** that when you are talking about James Greenhouses, you are talking about a well-run operation. Everybody talks about quality and everybody does their best. His stuff is high quality, but it is consistently high quality. That is key. When people talk about working with James Greenhouses, it immediately means that you are going to have product, you're going to have product on time, and it's going to be good stuff." - Allan Armitage on why James Greenhouses is the Operation of the Year



## “That was one of the things that really helped us

**grow.** Where bigger companies were more rigid, we would say yes to anything just to get market share.” - Leah James on being flexible

our ideas were, what we were doing and what our philosophy was about young plants and perennials. There is no substitute for that personal visit,” Ken says. “We just had some people that really believed in us and trusted us. We got our start from there. Word of mouth, to this day, has been our biggest asset.”

The first companies to give James Greenhouses business opportunities were Saul Nurseries, Iverson Perennials Gardens (now Hines Horticultural), Classic Groundcovers, McCorkle Nurseries and Layman Wholesale (now part of the Costa Farms family).

“In this industry, you’ve got your reputation and nothing else,” Ken says. “As a young plant supplier specifically, you don’t get a lot of second chances, and there are precious few first chances. They would give us a little bit of an order, and we would deliver and exceed their expectations.”

Now James Greenhouses works with the Proven Winners brand marketing program, as well as with Blooms of Bressingham on new introductions. The operation is also a rooting station for Darwin Perennials’ premium genetics, and Ken is proud of the Heuger Helleborus breeding program. The operation also works with brokers and other customers include Conard-Pyle, Danziger, PlantHaven, Syngenta, Terra Nova Nurseries and more.

These aren’t the only companies that are fans of the way the Jameses do business.

“Both Leah and Ken understand where they are going and drive their business plan to meet those goals. They are smart, articulate, business savvy and just a pleasure to work with,” says Nexus Southeastern Sales Manager Jerry Bleckley, who recently worked

with the Jameses on approximately an acre of Dual Atrium, glass-covered greenhouses. “They are well-educated growers and are not afraid to try new things.”

### Cut And Grown To A Higher Standard

As James Greenhouses grew, Ken and Leah changed their tagline from “Cut and Grown to a Higher Standard” to “Perennial Plugs, Specialty Propagation.” Despite the change, the mission to grow high-quality liners — and go after opportunities for growth — continues.

“When we started, we were so small that we could be completely flexible. So if a customer had a special request or a special cell size, we could fill that,” Leah says. “I can see that becoming a challenge for us. It’s easy when you’re small, but when you get bigger and you’re not personally responsible for watching over every little plant that’s growing, that has gotten harder. We try to fill our customers’ needs and fill their special requests.”

And James Greenhouses fills each order with product every grower can be proud of.

“I have a very clear picture in my mind of what it is that I want a grower to receive when they open the box or the truck doors open,” says Ken, who had the job of growing young plants into finished product at Iverson Perennials. “There is sort of a sinking feeling when you’re looking at material that you know is going to be really hard to work with. I know that feeling today. My goal is for growers to never have that feeling when they see a product that comes from our company.” **GG**