

## Responding to the market

*After 200 years of business, one Vermont grower has learned to listen to the market.*

[www.greenhousemag.com/walker-farm-nexus.aspx](http://www.greenhousemag.com/walker-farm-nexus.aspx)

Understanding the consumer demands of your market, and responding accordingly, will lead to a healthy, ever-evolving business.

Walker Farm, which has been around in some form since 1770, has developed according to its customers' demands for more than two centuries. Jack Manix, one of the co-owners of the farm stand and garden center operation, says Walker Farm now has more than 25 greenhouse structures designed to cater to southern Vermont customers.

Manix says his operation is now at the forefront of an edibles revolution.

“We didn't plan it that way, but we've always done both vegetables and floriculture. And the resurgence in the whole localvore thing (local food movement) has been phenomenal for business. Now we do winter CSAs and deep winter CSAs,” he says.

For a long time, Manix felt that floriculture was the “tail that wagged the dog,” allowing Walker Farm to grow edibles in 30 acres of growing space. Now, with the aforementioned local food movement beginning to spike in popularity, the dog now wags the tail, and edibles are more important than ever.

“Our goal was to become a destination spot and our combination of edibles and floriculture allowed us to accomplish that,” he says. Manix notes that despite Walker Farm's location in southern Vermont, customers often drive in from Massachusetts, Connecticut or New York.

In addition to offering deep winter greens, Walker Farm has been growing certified organic since the mid-1980s. Manix says his market demands organic production. In addition to doing finished produce, Walker Farm also offers organic starts.

“There still aren't a lot of people in our market who are doing organic starts. We are,” he says. “It helps us draw customers from all over the region.”

Being ahead of both the local food movement and the push for organic production has kept Walker Farm on the razor's edge of development and technology. It's also kept the business thriving in 2015.

“I'm always amazed that there are all these structures throughout Vermont and throughout parts of the United States that people use for three or four months a year and then let sit idle,” Manix says.

Walker Farm keeps its houses busy for 10 to 11 months a year. It cycles through three crops in most of the organic greenhouses and in the floriculture greenhouses it cycles through two crops. In the organic houses, it is able to grow certified organic bedding plants, which have a large market in the region, creating another profitable revenue stream. Then it's able to throw in tunnel tomatoes, peppers or eggplants through the summer into the fall. Then they plant winter greens in those houses for the winter months into March.

“We have every range of greenhouse from hoop houses to, what I consider the Cadillac of greenhouses, a Nexus. Like most growers we started out with very little technology and then quickly realized that the more technology we had, the better we could grow,” Manix says. “The Nexus and the wireless monitoring have all helped us to do better plants.”

Providing a variety of quality crops has helped Walker Farms weather a changing economy and consumer demands. Now, Manix can offer high-quality produce to his customers, even in the chilliest winter months.

“It’s what the market demands,” he says.