

Retail ready

By Kelli Rodda

Kaw Valley Greenhouses drops wholesale customers in favor of its own retail stores

Kaw Valley Greenhouses, based in Manhattan, Kan., took a leap of faith this year. After 42 years of selling to Kroger affiliates, the grower broke off the pair's long-term relationship to focus on its own retail operations across three states. This spring, Kaw Val-

ley operated 46 seasonal garden centers in Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska that were open from April to June.

The transition began in 2006, when Kaw Valley stopped selling to 70 supermarket customers in the Kansas City area. In 2009 and 2010, the grower stopped selling plants to Dillons and Baker's, both part of the The Kroger Co.

"We grow 100 percent for our own retail now," said Dan Parcel, retail director at Kaw Valley. "We started the retail

program about five years ago, and it was outperforming our supermarket customers."

Breaking off a 42-year relationship is no easy decision. "It was sad to part ways," Parcel said. "They did help us build our company. For 20 years they were our only customer."

Gaining more control

Being a retail grower gives Kaw Valley complete control and complete freedom, Parcel said.

"We don't have to count on someone else's employees to take care of our product or our customers," he said. "We always looked at the end consumer as 'our customer,' and it was frustrating to see grocery store employees either not caring or not knowing what they're doing."

Since getting out of the wholesale market, Kaw Valley's production processes and mix has not really changed.

"We grow fewer decorative contain-

Because Kaw Valley's plants are merchandised on asphalt, most plants are grown slow and cold to harden them off to withstand harsh retail conditions.



ers and hanging baskets because those are primarily impulse items we sold to the supermarkets,” Parcel said.

Hardy plants

Most of Kaw Valley’s retail locations are in parking lots equipped with hoop houses. Merchandising on an asphalt parking lot presents a couple of big challenges – heat and wind. To combat those challenges, Kaw Valley hardens off plants more so than typical growers, Parcel said.

“We grow cold and slow, and a large portion of our greenhouses are open,” he said. “We essentially grow outdoors because acclimation is important when we sell in such harsh conditions.”

Leon Edmunds, founder of Kaw Valley Greenhouses, learned about cold-grow acclimation from some Dutch growers in the Wichita, Kan., area, said Chris Edmunds, Leon’s daughter. She’s in charge of product planning and distribution.

“It makes such a difference subjecting plants to cold temperatures and drought stress. It translates to hardy plants,” she said.

The 7-acre production site in Manhattan consists of Cravo retractable roof and Nexus side retractable greenhouses, as well as several fully retractable units that Kaw Valley designed.

Crops like impatiens, geraniums and begonias are grown in a more traditional way in a warmer greenhouse, said Knute Edmunds, Leon’s son and Kaw Valley’s production manager.

The company produces annuals in quarts and 10-04 packs, “which is basically a 606 minus two cells,” Parcel said. Geraniums are grown in 1-quart containers, most branded material in quarts, Wave petunias and other specialty items in ½-pint containers, herbs in pints and perennials in 1- and 2-quart containers.

Parcel said the demand for 2-quart containers is increasing because consumers “like that ready-to-go look”.

Kaw Valley uses up to 20 percent field soil in its growing medium. The soil is known locally as “black-bottom soil” that is trucked in a short distance from Tuttle Creek Lake. The other medium components are perlite and sphagnum peat.

“It has great water-holding capacity and it provides mycorrhizae,” Parcel said. “It also helps the plants perform better in the landscape. The only drawback is it’s a heavy growing medium in terms of weight.”

Retail details

With 46 seasonal retail locations, Kaw Valley uses color as one of its primary distance visual merchandising tools.

“We want people to see us from the street and to come on in,” Parcel said.

Besides flower and foliage color, the retail grower uses signage and colored pots – purple pots for annuals and green pots for perennials.

Kaw Valley prints its name on the pots along with the tagline “Family owned and locally grown.” On larger pots, bits of the grower’s history is included.

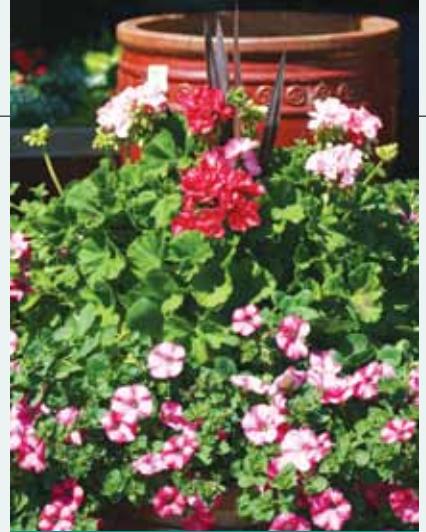
“Last year was our first big dip into retail, and we had our best year ever,” Parcel said. “This year went totally off the cliff and beat last year’s numbers.”

Parcel credits some of the increased sales to the “staycation” trend.

“People are staying home more and want their homes and yards to look better,” he said. “We’re in the home decorating business rather than the gardening field. A lot of industry research shows many customers are reluctant or resentful gardeners. They don’t consider themselves gardeners but want their home to look great. They want things that are quick and easy, and we try to facilitate that as much as possible.”

For more: Kaw Valley Greenhouses, (785) 776-8585; www.kawvalleygreenhouses.com.

After 42 years of selling wholesale, Dan Parcel, retail director at Kaw Valley Greenhouses, said the company decided to retail its product in Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska.



Kaw Valley Greenhouses

Founded: In 1967 by Leon and Pat Edmunds. The second generation – brother-and-sister team Chris and Knute Edmunds – are continuing the family business.

Location: Production facility in Manhattan, Kansas; retail locations throughout Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska.

Products: Annuals and perennials for the company’s 46 seasonal retail stores.

