

Family Matters

Getting into the garden center business was a learning experience for Joyce and David Hart, and they're passing on their adaptability and enthusiasm — and, eventually, their store — to their children.

By Paige Worthy

In June 1983, the United States sent the first woman into space. Compact-disc players were just hitting the market, and the Police's "Every Breath You Take" was at the top of the pop charts. And the life of one Connecticut couple was about to get a lot busier. On June 28 of that year, Joyce and David Hart welcomed twins — Christopher and Jessica, now 25 — and would soon begin building their family's business, Hart's Greenhouse and Florist, into what it is today.

The Early Years

Years before their children were born, Joyce and David both attended the University of Connecticut. They met on a livestock judging team while studying animal science, and by 1979 they were married and had plans to start a farm together with beef cows, sheep or pigs. But animal farms are expensive and require more land than the couple could afford at the time, so they took a different route.

"I had been working at a vegetable farm during the summers, and my husband had been a farm manager at UConn and had contact with greenhouses there," Joyce says. "So we decided the cheapest and easiest way to get into business would be to do vegetables."

They bought transplants, grew them and started selling what they'd grown at weekend farmers markets — when the concept of farmers markets was just catching on — until fall 1982, when Joyce found out she was pregnant with twins. The demanding weekends spent at market were no longer feasible, so the couple took the business to the next level: They started growing their own transplants. A simple cold frame on the side of their house in Canterbury, heated with horse manure, served as their rudimentary first greenhouse. And in the process, Joyce saw the possibilities that lay ahead after she grew a package of Johnny jump-up seeds on a whim, offered them for sale at a local hardware store...and they sold. ♦



Clockwise from top: As part of the new generation, Chris and Jess, both 25, are poised to guide the family business through a changing industry; 11-month-old Chris and Jessica Hart on the tractor with their dad, Dave; Jessica Hart hard at work with pansies; Chris relaxing on the mulch pile- recreation greenhouse style — perfect playground for a kid! Chris and Jessica Hart ready for school and waiting for the bus outside the store — pansies in bloom — must be May! Chris Hart carrying flats out of an early hoop house in 1990; Proud parents Joyce and Dave Hart can retire peacefully, knowing the family business will stay that way.

Produce was a tough business, Joyce says, and the couple realized they could make a better living growing flowers. They built a bigger greenhouse and grew more of their own materials — for the first time, there were more flowering plants than vegetables. Then, one day in spring of 1983, David came home to see their front yard filled with cars, Joyce recalls. “People came in wanting mixed planters for Memorial Day, so I was sitting cross-legged in the yard making them,” she says. “...We had no idea what we were doing.”

Bringing Up Babies

As with any small business getting its start, getting to the point of profitability — especially while raising two small children at

the same time — was a struggle. Because there were no other greenhouses in their area, the couple’s timing was excellent, but it took 20 years to build their business to where it is now. “We started from nothing,” Joyce says. “We had to go little by little, as best we could.”

When the kids turned 3, Joyce and David started looking for a property with more visibility and more room for growth. Their first store in Canterbury, Conn., opened in 1986 and still operates today. The family now owns two other locations: Brooklyn, Conn., which opened in 1998, and Norwich, Conn., which opened in 2005 and Jess now manages. Chris is currently managing greenhouse operations for the stores.

Joyce remembers setting up

a playpen for Jess and Chris in the greenhouse so she and David could watch them while they worked. And once they were big enough to roam around on their own, they were part of the business. Which inevitably meant their childhood would not be like other kids’. “It was definitely a family effort to get everything off the ground. They had to make some sacrifices,” Joyce says. “They didn’t get to do the stuff other kids did, but I didn’t think they were any worse for the wear.”

Jessica agrees. She says the business has always been part of her life, and she has loved every minute of it. “I first got involved in the business when I was about 6 years old, washing veggies for the stand after they were fresh picked,” Jess says. “I also remember hand writing hundreds of plant tags very early on. By the time I was 12, I was running the cash register and taking care of customers.”

She hadn’t always planned to study horticulture — after all, every child dreams of being an astronaut, doctor or ballerina at some point — but as she became more and more involved in the business, it was just part of the natural progression, Jess says. Chris wound up in the horticulture program as well, though it took him a bit longer to find his way back to the industry.

Throughout her formal education, Jess returned to Hart’s on weekends and after school; she was always eager to get back to the store. “I felt like I was missing out on the action when I was sitting in class taking final exams on a beautiful May day,” she says. “My parents have always made it fun for Chris and me, and it never really felt like just going to ‘work.’”

Moving Forward

As Joyce and David get older and consider how they’ll transition themselves out of the business, the community around them is also changing. A shaky economy, environmental issues, and unpredictable consumer needs and desires are challenges that Jess and Chris will face down the road as they take on more responsibility at Hart’s. But as part of the generation that’s entering adulthood and the target demographic of the future, the twins are poised to handle those challenges deftly.



Words of Wisdom

When asked to name three things she’d learned from her parents to prepare her for the future of the family business, here were Jess Hart’s picks:

1. Don’t be afraid to take risks.
2. Always do your personal best; don’t sweat the small stuff.
3. Keep up with industry trends and network.

“We’ve been going to various trade shows together for many years now,” Jess says. “I’ve always found them extremely interesting, helpful and inspiring.”

“We give them a lot of freedom and decision-making ability,” Joyce says. “We try not to stymie them in any way or hold them back from doing new things. We’re kind of progressive.”

At this point, Joyce says, it’s hard for her and David to think about leaving their working days behind entirely. In a recent ad campaign for the store, one of the top 10 reasons to shop at the garden center is, “There’s a Hart at every store.” It’s something the customers like, Joyce says, and it’s also great for employee morale. Joyce and David don’t want to see the ball dropped by leaving the stores understaffed. “You don’t want them to feel bad if something goes wrong,” she says. “They’re still your kids.”

But after 25 years of putting their heart and soul into the business, Joyce and David are thinking about taking a little time off. So they’re trying to teach Jess and Chris to do their best, focus on the big picture and keep thinking about the future. And the kids’ dedication to their family’s business and to the industry as a whole ensures that Hart’s Greenhouse & Florist will live long into the next generation.

“We all get along really well, and we all like each other. It’s as simple as that,” Jess says. “Plus, I want to make my parents proud — and what better way to do it than continuing on this business they’ve worked so hard at?”

Paige Worthy is managing editor of Lawn & Garden Retailer. She can be reached at pworthy@sgcmail.com or (847) 391-1050.



Top: The family’s second store opened in Brooklyn, Conn. in 1998. Bottom: A third store — managed by Jess Hart — followed suit in 2005. It’s based in Norwich, Conn.