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The winter of 2009-10 brought some of the worst snow Newark, Ohio, has seen in 20 or 25 years. Not exactly the conditions you want when you're in the process of razing your garden center and building a brand new structure from the ground up. But that's the challenge Ned and Mitzie Wilson and the staff at Wilson's Garden Center faced as April approached and they scrambled to get the garden center ready for a grand-opening weekend.

Winter weather notwithstanding, you might question the idea of adding a costly new facility in today's economy. Many people did. But the Wilsons felt they had plenty of good reasons to build.

"We always seem to go counter to what most people think," Ned says. "We had a decent spring last year, and we felt confident that the economy wasn't going to be as bad as what many people thought. So we started looking into it. We ended up getting approved for the money in the fall and decided rather than wait we'd go ahead and pull the trigger."

Yes, the garden center was profitable and there wasn't an obvious need for a new garden center structure. But Ned says the time had come for some big changes if they were to remain relevant to their customers. Plus, they have a new generation

Good Neighbors

Without a standout structure to attract customers (until recently), strong marketing efforts have been critical for Wilson's Garden Center. About three years ago they hired a TV and radio ad rep who came up with a creative idea to market the garden center. The



Starting Fresh

Ned and Mitzie Wilson's vision for the future delivers a new garden center structure that maximizes space, efficiency and sales.

of Wilsons, Brian and Holly, ready to take over operations, and they needed a solid business situation to manage.

"We looked at our business and knew longer term with the facility we had we were going to be flat to down in sales if we didn't reinvent ourselves. We wanted to have something showier from the road. We wanted something tall," Ned says.

That makes sense for a couple of reasons. One, Wilson's existing garden center

campaign featured Ned and Mitzie standing behind plants so you only see their faces from their noses up – a la the neighbor Wilson character from the Home Improvement TV series. They've been doing it for a few years now with commercials and their billboards and other marketing materials. They have updated the program this year with their faces hidden by shovels.

"We're always so amazed at how people react and that they recognize us," Ned says. "People come up to us in the garden center and cover up the bottom of their face."

was a series of poly-covered Quonset houses, set back from the highway and a little below it, so the structure didn't stand out to potential customers driving by. Two, the garden center is almost directly across the street from the Longaberger Basket Company headquarters building; a 7-story building in the shape of a giant picnic basket. Wilson's needed something that would draw some attention, too.

"Our original plan was just to build a taller front onto the existing structure, but Mitzie said, 'Why don't you just tear everything down and start over?' I don't know that she was really serious, but I jumped on it and that's what we did.

"As an independent business, you need to be able to change quickly."

Flexible Facility

The key to the Wilson's reconstruction project was maximizing space. The new structure – an atrium-style structure from Nexus – added just 5,000 square feet to the existing retail space, going from 14,500 to just less than 20,000. A covered

walkway was added over the nursery to tie everything together and create a race-track that pulls customers out into the nursery and back.

Even the parking lot was reconfigured to make better use of the space. In the end the construction only added about 10 spaces – bringing the count to 150, with overflow space to double that number on busy days – but a wider lot creates a much more comfortable customer experience.

One of the first things you notice upon entering Wilson's Garden Center is that it's an inviting, wide-open space, with poles farther apart than in a typical greenhouse structure. "We wanted more of a garden center feel," Ned says.

The open space also fits their philosophy of having everything flexible and mobile in the new facility. For the Wilsons, who also grow the vast majority of what they sell in the garden center, it's a philosophy that has taken some getting used to.

"It was tough making the transition in managing space from being a grower, where you want everything tight, to being a retailer, where you want everything very open and easy to shop," Ned says. "They say the retail floor space should be 40 percent display and 60 percent open. That totally goes against the grain for me as a grower."

To make the best use of all that open space, everything in the garden center is on rollers, from the benches (a new offering from Bench Systems) to the checkout counters. The wheeled benches also make merchandising and displays easier – you can load the bench in the back and simply roll it into place on the sales floor already stocked, he says. Things move easily from place to place to maximize the use of the space, highlight different products, or provide space for classes or events.

Benefits Of A New Structure

Wilson's is typically closed from Christmas Eve until March 1, but with the new facility will now be open year round. By hosting events in the garden center and adding unique products like high-end pet food and birding supplies, Ned and Mitzie

Sell On Wheels

The Creation Station is a central feature for Wilson's, just inside the front door. It serves multiple purposes. It's a potting station – much like many other garden centers have, but it can also serve as a florist station during off-peak times of year. There's space for three or four people to work there, so there's always some activity going on, and that creates interest and excitement for the customers as soon as they enter.

With all the surrounding displays on wheels, the area around the Creation Station can be cleared and replaced with chairs so the space can be used for gardening classes.

And even the Creation Station itself is portable, meaning it can be rolled out of the way to open space for big events or other high-profile displays.



are confident they'll have the traffic they need to remain profitable for the year.

Remaining open also allows them to keep their excellent staff on the payroll for the full year. Counting both production and

have people here like that."

The Wilsons don't expect the new facility to shake up their customer mix too much, but they do expect to bring in more customers overall. "We are kind of a county seat garden center, so we don't cater totally to the high end," Ned says. "We do have some high-end items for those who want them. We don't really have anything on the low end, though. Eclectic works for us. Our demographic is middle class. We're almost a farming community, but we're close to Columbus, too."

And indications are that their customers are responding to the changes. In what has been a weird-weather spring, traffic and sales seems to be holding steady.

"Our grand-opening weekend was a little rushed due to the bad winter weather, but it was definitely a success," Ned says. POS counts indicated more than 1,000 paying customers on Saturday and another 600-700 on Sunday. Saturday was our best April sales day ever." TGC

Wilson's Garden Center

Owner: Ned, Mitzie & Harry Wilson

Location: Newark, Ohio

Founded: 1958

Size: 2 acres

Annual Sales: \$2.4 Million

New Facility:

20,000-square-foot Nexus atrium-style greenhouse structure

Website: www.Great-Gardeners.com

retail, they employ 60 people in the spring, and 15 key people – department managers, etc. – year round.

"One of the goals of building was to support the staff we have without laying them off. The goal that time of year is not to add staff, but to use the new facility to keep the people we have," Ned says. "Our staff has been very supportive of change, and we know that's not always the case," Ned says.

"They embrace change and I love that in them.

They're not afraid of it, and we're really thankful to

More Online

Want to see more photos and video of Wilson's Garden Center? Then go to TodaysGardenCenter.com and look for the More Online logo.

Use your smart phone to watch the video

