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Suzie and John Platte
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Better greenhouses
mean better plants

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A smart balance between nature and technology helps Perennials Plus produce hardy plants.

By Kelli Rodda

Better greenhouses mean better plants



Perennials Plus grows about 1,200 varieties of perennials.

JOHN PLATTE, FOUNDER of Perennials Plus in Westfield, Ind., is a detective of sorts, keeping a sharp eye out for ways to improve his growing operation. From equipment upgrades to production tweaks, Platte doesn't let the trail of ideas grow cold.

His first upgrade occurred in 1996 when Perennials Plus went from a backyard hobby to a full-fledged business. He started the operation in a friend's backyard after retiring from 25 years of nursery stock sales. Platte tried golf — the familiar route of retirement. Instead of enjoying life on the greens, he came home hot, sweaty and irritated because his game wasn't getting any better.



INNOVATOR

Perennials Plus was named a GMPRO Innovator for continuous upgrades to greenhouse equipment and processes to improve its plants.

"So I decided why not get hot and sweaty and make money from it by getting into the greenhouse business," he said.

He put up a poly house in a friend's backyard, which turned into another house and yet another. Eventually he ran out of room and decided to buy his own land.

Backyard to big time

During an afternoon drive, he found an unassuming For Sale sign pointing toward an intersection. He stopped, took the sign and completed the sale in one week. He was the proud owner of 8 acres and a thicket of weeds. After extensive cleanup, he started construction. By 1997 Platte had a head house and eight hoop houses.

A major improvement happened two years later when he built a 16,000-square-foot Cravo open-roof

Perennials Plus

Founded: 1997 (at its current location) by John and Suzie Platte.

Location: Westfield, Ind.

Production space: 3 acres under cover.

Crops: Perennials, grasses, groundcover, selected shrubs, annuals and seasonal color. Container sizes range from an 1801 XL to a quart and a full 4-quart gallon up to a true 5-gallon container.

Market: Landscape contractors and independent garden centers.

Employees: Owners John and Suzie Platte, head grower Steve Ronyak, production manager Guillermo Mariano, maintenance manager Austin Fleck and up to 10 employees, depending on the season.

greenhouse. He'd seen demonstrations of the greenhouse technology and design, and thought it would work in the Indiana climate. He talked to Michigan and Ohio growers with the same type of house to make sure it was the right choice.

"From what I understand, we built the first retractable-roof greenhouse in the state of Indiana in 1999," he said.

Perennials Plus outgrew its first Cravo, and Platte built another

10,000 square feet in winter 2000. Cravo No. 3 (25,000 square feet) went up in winter 2001-2002, No. 4 (25,000 square feet) was built in summer 2003 and No. 5 (32,800) was completed in winter 2006. And with each new Cravo came better technology and improved growing processes.

Today, Perennials Plus grows about 1,200 varieties of perennials, as well as grasses, groundcovers, selected shrubs, annuals and seasonal color. Greenhouses are full year-round, and the selling season lasts 10 months. Platte's wife, Suzie, helps run the business with head grower Steve Ronyak, production manager Guillermo Mariano, maintenance manager Austin Fleck and up to 10 employees, depending on the season.

"The success of Perennials Plus would not be possible if it weren't for the team effort here," John said.

Open-and-shut case

Platte chose an open-roof greenhouse for its flexibility and efficiency.

"Cravo houses work extremely well for growing perennials and seasonal color. They offer more options when it comes to heating and cooling



Suzie and John Platte keep their greenhouses full year-round and sell product during 10 months.

Perennials Plus shapes strong bond with landscapers

Landscape contractors make up about 75 percent of Perennials Plus' customer base. Owner John Platte molded that market with his 25 years of experience selling nursery stock. Although perennials have gained in popularity during the last decade, Platte had to educate the contractors on the crop's value.

"I told them, 'Sell that land twice. When you plant a tree, plant something underneath it,'" Platte said.

Landscape contractors make excellent customers because they buy continually, he said.

"They go 10 months a year and we go 10 months a year," he said.

Platte's motto of growing the best plant for the local area also keeps contractors coming back for more orders.

"The formula works, whether it's a perennial, grass, shrub or annual," he said.

Platte is passionate about his customer base. His growing practices and business plan gel with landscape contractors and independent garden centers. Platte will not add big-box stores to his customer base.

"If I'm ever forced to sell to the big boxes, I'll close this place down and turn it into boat and RV storage," he said.



Perennials Plus expanded its growing space to some outdoor pads after one of its greenhouses collapsed.

compared to double poly or hard-cover houses," John said.

The shade system uses diffused light, which keeps the greenhouse temperature up to 10°F lower than the outside temperature. The shade system also acts as a heat-retention system in winter, which saves about 20 percent of energy use.

"The heat-retention curtain opens in the morning and allows the house to heat up. The curtain closes at 4 p.m., and the shade system retains a certain amount of heat. The side-



Side walls are opened and closed based on soil temperature.

walls open to keep the house cool when necessary," John said.

A Bartlett climate-control system opens and closes the side walls based on soil temperature.

Winter temperatures are maintained at 32°F in the perennial houses.

In the seasonal color houses Platte opens the house completely to harden off the plants.

"It produces a better landscape plant," John said. "They're not going from greenhouse conditions to the landscape, which keeps them from being stunted, stressed or sunburned."

Three of the five houses have bottom heat. Two of the houses use Nelson tractor sprinklers "for better coverage" and one house also has microsprinklers from Netafim.

John is going to try some irrigation booms — items he picked up from a greenhouse auction. John also bought a 2 million Btu boiler at the auction.

In February 2007, the Plattes faced

Hardy soil mix makes resilient plants

Perennials Plus uses one growing mix for all of its crops. It's patterned after a nursery mix: 70 percent pine bark and the rest is perlite, lime, water-holding polymer, micronutrients and a slow-release fertilizer.

It's a recipe that's been developed and modified for the last decade.

"It's more consistent for landscapers and it grows a plant that doesn't require as much maintenance when it's first planted," John said.

It's mixed locally at a soil-mixing plant and delivered in bulk. It's stored weed-free in a barn where low moisture levels are consistent. The slow-release fertilizer doesn't start to work until moisture is added.

Perennials Plus conducts soil tests every two weeks year-round to check electrical conductivity and pH levels.



One growing medium, which is modeled after a nursery mix, is used for all plant material.

their biggest challenge of the business to date. Their newest greenhouse collapsed due to engineering problems. And it was full of perennials. But John's process-improvement acumen saved the season. John and his team squeezed plants into other greenhouses and made adjustments to production processes, such as growing some plant material outside.

"We made the best of a bad situation," Suzie said.

The Plattes didn't cancel any orders, despite losing one-third of their production space for an entire season. By fall, the 2007 sales were up 20 percent over 2006, even without the fifth greenhouse. A replacement house is scheduled for completion in February 2008.

FOR MORE: Perennials Plus, (317) 867-5504; www.perennials-plus.com. ❖❖