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In Memoriam: Tom Van Wingerden

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GrowerTalks is saddened to report the untimely passing of Tom Van Wingerden, founder and patriarch of Metrolina Greenhouses in Huntersville, North Carolina in December. Tom was killed early Saturday morning, December 19, in a vehicle accident on the nursery property, when the utility vehicle he was driving crashed inside the greenhouse. He was 63.

Tom was one of 16 children of Aart and Cora Van Wingerden, whose extended family runs greenhouse operations and allied supply companies throughout the United States.

Tom was born in Ridderkerk, the Netherlands in 1946 and immigrated to the United States in 1971. He started Metrolina in Huntersville the next year, building it into one of the largest bedding plant operations in the U.S., covering 150 acres, employing 600 people and doing annual sales of \$130 million. He sold the operation to his children in 2006 but was still active in the business.

He is survived by his wife, Vickie; his six children, Art, Abe (who is one of our Growers Talk Business columnists), Helen, Michael, Rose and Thomas; and 14 grandchildren.

Tom's legacy in the greenhouse business is far-reaching. He was a pioneer in greenhouse automation and an early adopter of Dutch greenhouse technology, such as movable benches and automatic pot spacing equipment. He also developed his own systems, such as the first fully automatic plug transplanter, the Metroplanter, in the early 90s, which paved the way for growers of nearly any size to now be able to afford transplanter automation.

Out of the greenhouse, Tom was passionate about his faith and about his families extensive mission work in Haiti, called "Double Harvest." He was also an avid auto racer, competing in the 5/8th scale Legends series at nearby Lowe's Motor Speedway, where he raced with his sons Michael and Thomas.

I had the pleasure of talking with Tom on many occasions, both formally and informally, at his greenhouse, at

OFA and at NTV and Horti Fair in the Netherlands, where he could most often be found at the booth of his automation designer, Frank Van Dijk of FW Systems. What I remember most about him was his complete candor and openness on any topic. He'd answer any question, without fear of his competition gaining any sort of advantage. In fact, he was a firm believer in allowing the industry to benefit from the efforts of leading greenhouses.

But at the same time, he knew that few would be able to keep up with him. For instance, when I visited Metrolina in the late 90s to write about Tom's newest creation, the gantry-style internal transport system that moves plants in and out of their newest range, he shared every detail. I joked that if a competitor came armed with a Nikon and a tape measure, he'd probably welcome them. He replied something to the effect that, "Hey, if someone wants to copy this, let them. They'll go broke trying."

Abe Van Wingerden said of his father, just after the accident, "As someone told us yesterday, in the 63 short years that Dad was with us on this earth, he packed about 125 years of life into it. While we are all sad, it has been uplifting to see how Dad impacted so many lives in a positive way."