

Cover Story

8/31/2026

A Willingness to Change

Jennifer Polanz



In speaking with Tyler Cerbo for more than an hour, what I got from him is a vibe of discipline, strong work ethic and humble gratitude. Chosen as this year's *Green Profit/The Garden Center Group Young Retailer Award Winner*, Tyler, 33, understands his limitations (he admits he's the least knowledgeable person on his team when it comes to the plants), and is quick to credit his team for the successes they've seen as they work to rebuild the 113-year-old business that had struggled to recover after the Great Recession. He's also a sponge, soaking up information from those he sees succeeding and continuing to look for the people who can help him in his goals of growing the business, sharing what he can to help their business grow, too.

It's that dedication and focus that has helped Cerbo's Parsippany Greenhouse & Garden Center come back from the brink of closure 13 years ago. The business dates all the way back to 1913, when Tyler's great-grandfather Antonio Cerbo, an Italian immigrant, bought 26 acres in Parsippany for \$2,600. They were a family of farmers back in Italy (though Antonio himself was a stonemason), so he started a farm, growing produce and trucking it to New York City to sell. As the area grew around them, they could sell locally and eventually built

a greenhouse to add flowers and then nursery to the mix.

Today, the garden center sits on 3 acres, with the land around sold off throughout the years to continue operations. The family has expanded out to also own a 40-acre wholesale nursery and a 220-acre tree farm in Sussex County (all run as separate businesses). Tyler himself co-owns a 45-acre farm with his brother where they grow produce that's also separate from the garden center, which he calls a side hustle.

Growing Up Near the Business

Tyler's family lived a stone's throw from the tree farm in rural Sussex County, so most of his childhood was spent working there. On the weekends he worked at the garden center during peak season when extra labor was needed. His dad was part of the family business, but his mom, a florist, was not. She wasn't so keen on Tyler and his two brothers going into the business, either.

"Growing up, it was not doing very well and it was hard, you know, a lot of work," he said. "The outlook didn't look that great."

After high school Tyler started out on a pre-med track at Muhlenberg College where he also played football.

"I had been deeply involved in athletics my whole life. That was kind of why I went to college, I wanted to continue my pursuit there," he said. "I'd like to stay within the realm of athletics, so I thought I would do athletic training or eventually physical therapy."

There he met one of the most influential people of his life—his head coach and position coach (as a free safety) Mike Donnelly, who later passed away from leukemia.

"He was a tremendous leader, a tremendously impactful person in my life and just so well respected," Tyler said. "I learned so much about team structure and, really, leadership from him. I consider various members of my family tremendous leaders, but outside of my family, that was really impactful for me to experience."

Tyler added, too, that his Freshman year he considered himself the worst player on the team, struggling through multiple injuries. With his coach's influence and encouragement, he persevered and by his Senior year was named one of three captains and helped lead his team to a nationally-ranked, one-loss season. It was those lessons in toughness, leadership and discipline that eventually translated to his work at the garden center.

Transitioning Into the Business

During college Tyler moved from a medical track to business with a concentration in marketing, and once he graduated—after a couple of years at home—he moved to Morristown, about 15 minutes away from the garden center and started working there.

"I feel very fortunate for that actually when it happened because it was a time frame when the business was so fragile and really not doing well," he recalled. "It opened up a ton of opportunity for some creative freedom for myself to try some different things."

Tyler credits the family and the team there for being open to trying those new strategies as they struggled to keep the doors open. That's not a small thing, particularly in 2013, when the retail operation's revenue dove to \$694,000 (by comparison, they're on pace in 2026 to bring in about \$4.8 million).

"The theme, I would say, was there was a willingness to change and that was myself, my family, the generation above—there was a willingness to try things differently," he said. "We rebranded our logo, we brought in a new POS system, we did a lot of things and we still need to do a lot of things."

He stressed, too, that they kept their core values. Not everything changed. "If we could keep our core values intact and be the pillar we built out of—and this goes back to some of the team leadership stuff that I had a good opportunity to learn in college—if we could keep that intact, we were willing to change anything. And I think that that's where we started to find some success," he said.

Cerbo's Parsippany Greenhouse & Garden Center

Location: Parsippany, New Jersey

Size: 3 acres

2025 Revenue: \$4 million

Employees: About 20 peak season; 10 full time

Top 5 Categories

1. Nursery (perennials, shrubs, trees)
2. Greenhouse (annuals, houseplants, tropicals)
3. Garden Center Inside (Accessories, non-plant, pottery, fertilizers, grass seeds)
4. Bulk Products (mulch, topsoils)
5. Bagged products

Following close by are seasonal (Christmas) and ice melt depending on the weather.

Adding to the Success

Rebuilding the business wasn't the result of one action, but a long, laborious process of really getting back to the fundamentals of business and telling the story of the garden center, which had such a long history in the community.

"There's not a lot of businesses like ours in the area. There's not a lot of businesses that are this old," Tyler said. "I just felt like there were a lot of key components that if we could tell that story the right way, it would be compelling and we would have success. And I also just thought we had several value propositions, too, that made us competitive."

For example, the retail operation has a 10,000-sq. ft. greenhouse where they grow their first turn of annuals in the spring, which gets the wheels turning before they buy in more to sell through. They do the same with the first flush of poinsettias in late fall. They started telling that message of the value of growing their own, as well as moving into more digital marketing to attract interest on social channels.

Their story became one of incremental gains, slowly and steadily rebuilding trust with their vendors and with their customers, as well as relying on each other to grow the business.

"I'm very proud of our team for that because we didn't just step into one thing and that is what turned it around," Tyler added. "I really do feel like we foundationally rebuilt something that has sustainability, that is genuinely strong now. It's not leaning on one thing that is what propped us up."

The gains have been so steady that when COVID hit, it was just another year of gains. In fact, their greatest year-over-year gains have come in the years after the pandemic, which is not the norm.

"What great lessons to learn, for myself and our team to go through—everyone here has been this integral part of rebuilding this dinosaur of a business," he said. "And I think that's been so rewarding to them and so exciting to people joining a team and being part of this history lesson of 'this is where we were, this is where we are, this is where we're going.'"



Where to Go From Here

The business faces challenges that are difficult to overcome. For example, a parking lot with 26 spaces and 3 acres that's pretty much land-locked with no expansion opportunity. But they don't focus on what they can't control, only what they can. And for Tyler and his team, that's operational efficiency and execution, as well as infrastructure improvements (including a new POS system). He's also interested in AI and how that can help them become a better business.

"I'm very excited about the positive outcomes that we can have," he said. "I just don't think we have ever existed in a time where it was easier to run a business structurally from a backend standpoint than it will be five years from now with what technology can do. And that's such an advantage if you can lean into that."

He's also reached out to people he's met at The Garden Center Group Fall Event and Cultivate to find out how they're creating processes and handling certain situations. It's what families have done for generations in this industry to improve their businesses and the younger generation is finding each other to create their own networks.

One area where Tyler knows he needs to improve is his work-life balance, which in its current form he admits is unsustainable. That's why he's working hard to create better processes to improve that aspect for everyone, including himself. He's engaged to his fiancée, Caroline, who's a labor and delivery nurse, and they're getting married this month, with a honeymoon planned for Spain. They both love to travel and Tyler also enjoys working out and reading in his spare time.

The future is bright for Tyler and for Cerbo's, and he's equally positive about the industry as a whole, advocating for younger retailers like himself to find their network of people by attending in-person events and to not be afraid to share. In fact, he added, outside of e-commerce, there's no possibility of competition and there are many benefits to being able to share information.

"It's so valuable because you can openly network with people and discuss very, very intimate things about your business," Tyler said. "And I think we need to lean into that more." **GP**

Trees for Troops

I wanted to call this program out because it shows how integral Cerbo's is to its community. They started this around eight years ago and really act as the conduit for the garden center and surrounding community to show support for military families. Cerbo's sources the trees from local farms, including their own tree farm, and local residents donate the trees at cost to Trees for Troops. On one morning, the store shuts down for

about two hours and volunteers come out in droves to load up trailers with Christmas trees that FedEx then routes to military families.

“It’s so cool. The local fire department comes, they put a huge flag out over the highway; the police department comes and shuts the road down and do traffic control for us,” Tyler said. “We’ve done this in pouring rain, in snow—more years than not, the weather sucks. And it’s so cool to see how many people from our community come out to do this.

“An 8-year-old can come out or a 12-year-old, 14-year-old can come out with their family and physically do the work to pass it forward for someone on a volunteer effort. I just think that is tremendously impactful.”

They’ve loaded up as many as 500-plus trees in the past, but now they’ve found a sweet spot of about 300 trees. And Cerbo’s involvement even garnered national attention with a spot on “Fox & Friends” a couple of years ago.