

Features

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120 Years & Still Evolving

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Pictured: General manager Jesse Camargo (front) and plant buyer/project manager Travis Radie Perry team up to drive innovation and inspiration at Nicholson-Hardie Nursery & Garden Center.

Dallas, Texas, retailer Nicholson-Hardie Nursery & Garden Center is celebrating a milestone anniversary and Green Profit had a unique opportunity to speak with two of the key team members. We not only learned a lot about the 120-year-old business and its history, but also gained insight into how Nicholson-Hardie has successfully evolved in a dynamic market while maintaining relevance, serving changing demographics and empowering employees to take

things to the next level.

“Do You & Be You” is a mantra shared by general manager Jesse Camargo and plant buyer/project manager Travis Radie Perry. This means every employee is encouraged to follow their own style. And in keeping with this healthy mantra, this Q&A was inspired by Travis, who reached out to Ball Publishing at Cultivate’19 because he’s proud of the company and knew he had the freedom to explore opportunities, like this conversation.

Some quick background to set the stage. Both Jesse and Travis are in their late 20s and have worked at Nicholson-Hardie for more than eight years. Jesse started watering and cleaning up at the indoor-focused store while still in college pursuing an accounting degree. He transitioned to managing the inventory, invoicing and incoming orders when he was just a junior in college. When the GM position opened at the nursery he applied for the position.

Travis moved back to Dallas after leaving art school in Savannah, Georgia, and started at Nicholson-Hardie. His first summer at the nursery was the record hottest summer since 1980 and he’s still there! He quickly developed a passion for plants, and during a management transition, he started ordering perennials on his own, developing great relationships with the local growers and nursery suppliers. Five years ago, he took over as bedding buyer and hasn’t looked back.

Starting from where they did and working their way up the ladder has brought both guys a unique perspective and fulfillment, gained by hard work. Let’s hear what they have to say.

Q: When was the company founded, who started it and where did it all begin?

Jesse Camargo: The company was started by David Hardie in the exact same location in 1899. Hardie Seed was one of five or six seed companies supplying local vegetable growers in the Dallas area. In 1928, another seed store owner, Robert Nicholson, bought Hardie Seed and merged the company into Nicholson-Hardie. Interestingly, both Hardie and Nicholson were Scottish immigrants. In 1973, the company was purchased by the Bracken family who owns it to this day.

Q: When the Bracken family took over, what were their goals for the business and what were some of the changes they made?

JC: John Bracken bought Nicholson-Hardie with plans to build a family business. The initial goal was survival. He evolved the company through deals and partnerships. One example is we supplied Neiman Marcus with seed packets back when people used catalogs to shop for unique gifts and stocking fillers. John expanded inventory by adding fertilizers, bareroot pansies and unique plants Dallas wasn’t familiar with, like Japanese Maples. He added the nursery location in 1986, then in the late ’90s added covered walkways and multipurpose retail spaces.

Q: How has the area changed over the course of time and how has this impacted the business in recent years?

Travis Radie Perry: There has been a heavy shift in the past two years with new, young families moving in the surrounding area. With the transition in managers, Jesse has allowed many unique changes to the physical appearance of the store, appealing to new shoppers. Resourcefulness has been key. Using reclaimed corrugated metal and cedar wood panels is always fun, but it also keeps our aesthetics on point.

JC: The neighborhood around the nursery has turned over dramatically. They’re improving their gardens by adding seasonal color and unique shrubs, perennials and ornamental trees. Our customers are now super interested in growing their own kale and herbs for cocktails. We also have new neighbors like a hot yoga studio, a modern Mexican restaurant, a butcher shop and a new seafood restaurant that have brought us new customers.



Q: Understanding the history and recent demographic changes sets the stage for what the business looks like today. What are some of the most exciting recent changes and why have you moved in these directions?

TRP: We transformed our old back building into a complete garden shop with books, small pots and garden décor. We altered layouts in the floor plan to create a nice flow—changing angles and shapes and customers have loved it. It's gone from a grocery store with aisles for products to a modern retail setting like Anthropologie.

JC: One of my main focuses is making sure employees are happy. Simple as that. I want them to know they have creative freedom and that I trust them in fulfilling their job. I'm nowhere near being a micro-manager! Improving the work culture has probably been the best move I've made as GM. Since this change, I've received positive feedback from co-workers, the owners and even customers. It's reflected in the appearance of the store and customer service.

Pictured: fresh and healthy live goods from local suppliers fill benches at Nicholson-Hardie in all seasons.

Q: What are some of the changes and new directions you see the business heading toward in the coming years?

JC: Nicholson-Hardie has gained its reputation by word of mouth since the beginning. This is, of course, still in effect, but in trying to reach a new market we have to try new methods. Being a Millennial and active on Instagram, I've pushed towards starting a social media presence. We tried having a marketing agency run it for us, but didn't feel the expense was justified. One of the owner's wives runs it now. Travis and I are always taking pictures and videos and sending them to her to post. We recently started using the IGTV feature to promote the store through short videos. (Check them out: @nicholsonhardie.)

TRP: I'm not a social media person, but consistently follow many channels on YouTube. Our first video on Instagram was very spontaneous. A couple of hours before we closed we made the decision to record something and see what we could do with it. So Jesse and I worked on it after hours.

Q: What gets you up in the morning, fired up and ready to go?

JC: Coffee! At least two cups a day! Everyone at the store knows I don't function properly before coffee. The other thing is knowing that every day will be different, whether it's a new project, new plants or new customers. This isn't like corporate: predictable. It keeps us interested and inspired. Working with an awesome team is the best! There's always good energy and positive vibes going around. I sound like a total hippie now ...

TRP: Usually a call or text from a grower at 7:00 a.m., but it's not a bother at all. I look forward to seeing drivers and talking to the office staff. It makes the job genuinely enjoyable. I love the sense of community that exists in the horticulture industry.

Q: What else do you want Green Profit readers to know about Nicholson-Hardie and what would you tell another nursery or garden center who wants to know how you guys do it?

JC: Do you! Stay in your lane and forget about your competitors. If y'all start focusing too much on the competition, you start losing focus on your own goals. Apply yourself and don't question too much. It's crazy to know that the company has existed for 120 years. I'm proud of being part of its evolution and progression in a new direction.

TRP: Be you. Being personal and transparent is a big deal. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, let's ask the Google." The objective is customers leaving satisfied and happy with their experience. Another thing that keeps it fun and enjoyable is implementing personal style. Lastly, just having a positive attitude. That can be easier said than done, but it carries a long way. **GP**