

Features

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Meeting Consumer Demand

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Berns Garden Center and Landscaping is always evolving. When Al and Cherie Berns bought a greenhouse on an acre of land in 1956, they had no idea the business, which was open just eight weeks a year in the beginning, would

eventually operate 360 days a year and grow to employ 50 to 135 people annually.

Now, as it celebrates its 65th year, the business includes four divisions: Berns Garden Center, Berns Landscaping, Berns Production Greenhouses and a new online store.

Store Supervisor and Buyer Shannon Irving says the two retail locations in Beavercreek, Ohio, and Middletown, Ohio, appeal to a wide range of customers, thanks in part to the Beavercreek store's proximity to Wright Patterson Air Force Base. The stores cater to both a rural and urban customer base.

Growing Profits

Annuals are the biggest sellers for Berns, and being a retail grower means the garden center can easily fine-tune its product mix to meet demand and maximize profits. The stores carry 1,500 SKUs in annuals alone, and Berns is able to produce an 85% to 90% margin on those plants (not including overhead and shrink).

"The retail annual team comes together with the production grower supervisors over the summer to start planning for the next year based on sales, popularity of items from our customers, and new and exciting products," Shannon says, adding they're always sure to present the toughest cultivars grown to date.

Excel is used to coordinate ordering between the retail stores and production operation, and cloud-based technology keeps everyone on the team up to date.

Game Changer: E-Commerce

Due to the nature of the product, e-commerce isn't easy for garden retailers to offer. But Berns has found a way to make it work, selling annuals, perennials and shrubs online for curbside pickup. Although plans to implement online ordering had been in the works for years, the COVID-19 crisis created the momentum to get it up and running last spring.

"With the store being under restrictions, fortunately not shut down in Ohio, we were able to still service those customers who had concerns about coming in person," Shannon says of the Shopify store Berns created last spring for online ordering.

The response was huge and the team quickly realized Shopify wouldn't work long term due to the sheer volume of orders. As a result, they began designing their own professional online store, which is now live and offers annuals, trees, shrubs, perennials and some bagged goods.

Berns uses an online platform called Wool! Commerce for order fulfillment, coupled with Modern Retail for software integration, which links to the stores' POS system. Available inventory is uploaded to the online store via the POS system.



Pictured: Berns Garden Center and Landscaping has its own production facility of about 4 acres under glass in Middletown, Ohio, close to both retail operations.

Online orders are sorted and sent to the production greenhouse supervisor, and the production team begins picking the items, and grouping and sorting them for corresponding orders. The orders are then shipped from the production facility the day before the customers' pickup date.

The team has been sure to grow enough product to allocate a designated number of plants for both the in-store and online operations. Shannon says they do occasionally sell out online during promotions, but customers are happy to learn the plants are also available for in-store purchase.

Overall, the introduction of the online store has brought a whole new level of customer service to the garden center, while also allowing the company to move more product.

"We built a whole new store and division without having to build a building," Shannon says. **GP**

About This Series

In 2021, we will feature a different garden retailer each month from The Garden Center Group's Best Practices group. These retailers achieved 10% or more profit in the previous year. The Garden Center Group offers Weekly Department Reviews, as well as an Annual P&L Study for those clients who wish to participate. Find out more at www.thegardencentergroup.com.