

Features

7/1/2022

An Adaptable Philosophy

Jennifer Zurko



Pictured: Sarah and David Levy (in his signature big hat), owners of Willow Oaks Farm in Brownsville, Tennessee.

David Levy grew up in the garden center business, but it took some convincing with a deathbed plea to get him to truly embrace it.

David's parents, Henry and Louise, started Willow Oaks Farm in Brownsville, Tennessee, in 1947, growing peaches and apples on an 80-acre orchard. During the winter of 1955-56, Tennessee experienced a deep freeze that killed the blossoms and developing fruit on all the peach trees on the property. After that, the Levys had to make a choice, so they decided to build a few greenhouses to sell ornamentals.

When David was growing up on the farm, the last thing he wanted to do was help run the business. He was a free spirit, traveling the country, crashing on friends' couches and attending college classes. But then one day Henry got very ill and ended up in the hospital. There was a good chance he would never leave the hospital, so when David went to say his goodbyes,

Henry asked him if he would take over the business. David couldn't deny his father's last deathbed request, right? So, of course, he said yes.

It turns out that it wasn't quite Henry's time yet. He ended up recovering and lived another 25 years. "I realized I was duped," said David with a smirk. But, true to his promise, David moved back home and started taking over the business.

Accepting Change

David's wife Sarah helps him run Willow Oaks Farm. Up to the time of my visit in early May, Sarah had been working as an attorney in the local courthouse for the past 11 years. She'd literally just quit when I stopped by. She'd been

helping out at the farm part time, but knowing that David needed more help and that it's truly her passion, she decided to give up law to dedicate all of her time to the business.

Sarah admitted that her decision was also made in part because of some self-reflection. She's recently had close friends pass away and it made her think about what she really wanted to do with her life.

Currently, Willow Oaks Farm is on 15 total acres, with 5 acres for the greenhouses and retail area, and 5 acres for growing pumpkins in the fall.

"Our philosophy is to adapt," said Sarah. "We've been through lots of change. And we embrace it even if it scares the hell out of us." (See the sidebar.)

Pictured: Willow Oaks Farm's logo is a sketch of a photo of David and Sarah's son Jacob when he was younger wearing David's big hat and smelling petunias.



When you drive up to the property, the first thing you see is the garden center, but it only makes up about 20% to 25% of the business; 80% to 85% of their customer base is landscapers, wholesalers and other IGCs. They grow all of their own annuals, perennials, herbs, vegetables and houseplants. They bring in shrubs and trees from other nurseries. And they do tons of spring hanging baskets and mixed combinations—those seem to be the most popular item at Willow Oaks. And they do offer pansies in the fall, but no poinsettias.



In his Tennessee drawl, David smiles and always seems to say something clever and funny. Like when he said, "My mama didn't raise no fool ... except for my brother and sister."

And then he says, "Customers say I'm smart—if I was so damn smart why would I work this hard? I guess I'm addicted to it. And I'm just getting good at it."

As with many parts of the country, spring came late to Tennessee with lots of rain, so David said they got a bit of a late start with planting. Last year, they had 10 to 12 good weekends in a row and got to the point where they

were selling out. It just goes to show that when it comes down to it we're all bound by the weather.

"I used to not believe weather was a factor," said David. "I didn't want to believe it. I thought I was more in control than that."

Maintaining Success

The Levys have had their share of challenges. From tragic weather events to the local chapter of the White Citizen's Council showing up on the farm because David's parents employed African-American workers that were members of the NAACP, they've had to manage the ups and downs with owning a greenhouse business. But each experience has added to their success story, and proven that being flexible and willing to change can keep you grounded and focused.

When I visited, there was a lot of buzz around the news of a new Ford plant being built in the area. Last fall, Ford and South Korean battery manufacturer SK Innovation announced the companies were teaming up to build a state-of-the-art facility in Haywood County to ramp up production of electric F-150s. According to local news reports, the new factory is a \$5.6 billion investment that will bring 6,000 jobs to the area.

That's a lot of potential new customers for Willow Oaks Farm, but David is very matter-of-fact about it. Their

customer base already extends from far out of Brownsville. To David, more customers means that maybe they'd have to expand and he's at the point where he's looking to scale back the time he spends on the business, which is hard when your house is steps away from the greenhouse.

"Who cares about getting bigger?" said David. "We've built something that's a bit easier to manage. I want to get to a point where I can take more time off and not work as hard."

David & Sarah Levy's "Principles" for Willow Oaks Farm:

1. Shut up and listen.
2. Wear a big hat and long sleeves. You're going to get old in the greenhouse and so is your skin. (David got this advice from hort legend Claude Hope.)
3. Read, study and ask questions.
4. Measure three times, cut once.
5. Embrace change, even when it scares the hell out of you.
6. Treat your employees as well as you treat your customers.
7. Take vacations and limit your horticultural excursions to four hours.
8. When you violate # 7, pamper your family.
9. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.
10. As Louise Levy said, you only have a sense of humor if you can laugh at yourself. **GP**