

Hardy Steps Forward

Welby Gardens, creators of one of the oldest and most well-known plant brands, continues to expand its business to meet industry trends and demands.

BY JASMINA DOLCE

Welby Gardens — now in its 64th year of business — has become a venerable one-stop shop for its various customers. But it hasn't always been that way. What began in 1948 as a small produce farm of 1,500 square feet has grown to be a 23-acre diversified producer for wholesale and young plant production.

Four generations later, not only does Welby Gardens now supply finished plants to independent garden centers and landscapers, as well as young plants to other growers, but the company also runs three retail garden centers. Through diversification, branding, and partnerships with retailers and consumers, this family business has worked its way up to becoming one of the biggest and most well-known growers in Colorado.

Part of Welby Gardens' success is due to the Gerace family's willingness to try new things and diversify the business while never allowing the plant quality to suffer. The company has changed its business composition many times over the years, and it will probably change more in the future. As the industry changes, so does Welby Gardens.

A Brief History

"It seems like every four or five years, there's another big jump," says Al Gerace, president and CEO of Welby Gardens. Al has seen the company grow exponentially since its early years. His parents began the business in 1948, producing vegetable starts locally.

By 1958 the company doubled in size, and over the next few decades Al and his siblings and their children joined in the business, which stopped growing produce in 1980. "We had to develop a full-time business," says Gerace. So the company moved exclusively into ornamentals and began to ship out of state eventually from points west of the Mississippi River and throughout the Rocky Mountain West.

Welby Gardens at a glance

LOCATION: Three facilities in Denver, Colo.

GROWING AREA: 23 acres

MANAGEMENT: Al Gerace, president & CEO; Carmen Gerace, vice president; John Gerace Sr., secretary and treasurer; Marty Gerace, general manager; Mark Gerace, CFO; John Gerace Jr., sales and production manager; Dan Gerace, production coordinator

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 150 year round
(360 during spring season)

SALES AREA: Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming



LED lights are used on hydroponic basil in the greenhouse.

Supporting *Young Growers*

Support for students and the next generation of horticulturists is a top priority at Welby Gardens. “We’re big supporters of Colorado State University,” says Al Gerace. “We do all their seed-grown trials.

“It is very difficult for students that are going to manage something for a year or two to learn how to germinate. So we do all the germination for them. If there are items that come in that are unrooted, we root it for them.”

Welby Gardens also participates in internship programs for students earning a degree in a horticulture-related field so they’re able to gain hands-on experience in the greenhouse.

“This year, we had an American Floral Endowment student,” says Dan Gerace. “And we usually have an intern every summer from Colorado State University.”

Dan (who happens to be a member of *GPN*’s 40 Under 40 Class of 2012) is also very involved with the Career Days event at CSU and junior high programs in the county. “We get kids familiar with and try to get them involved some way in the greenhouse. We take them on tours and give them ideas of possible future careers.”



The Hardy Boy brand and logo have been around since 1976.



Today, Welby Gardens is comprised of three basic divisions. About 75 percent of the business is its wholesale division. Half of the wholesale business goes to independent garden centers, and the other half goes to landscapers. About 10 percent of the business is dedicated to its garden centers, and another 15 percent is the company's young plants division under the name of **hardystarts**, and other small miscellaneous projects, one of the newest being its organic and hydroponic production.

"Last year we started an organic division, which is producing organic basil and hydroponic basil for the local market," shares Gerace, "which is kind of going back to our roots, which was originally produce."

Differentiation Leads to a Brand

For those of you familiar with Welby Gardens, the first thing that may come to mind is the Hardy Boy brand. Hardy Boy is one of the oldest and most well-known brands of ornamentals and edibles in the industry today.

"We've had our logo since 1976, and Hardy Boy has served us well," says Gerace. "We wanted to distinguish ourselves from other growers with the way we grew."

At Welby Gardens, crops are grown on the dryer side and the amount of chemicals used is minimized. "We try to tone the plant with fertilizer and with dry conditions so that the plants can take the shocks when they're out of here," adds Gerace. "We also, unlike a lot of other growers, still use some mineral soil." These unique growing practices led to the Hardy Boy concept.

Hardy Boy has allowed the Geraces to promote along with their customers. Advertising has made a huge impact on the business as well as the business of local garden centers. The brand is well known throughout Colorado and the surrounding region.

Being a greenhouse grower who also runs a retail garden center can sometimes create competition with customers. However, Gerace says it's quite the opposite at Welby Gardens. "We're not competing with them; we're co-branding with them," he says.

"There's about 20 independent garden centers that advertise with us on a regular basis," he adds. "We get a group of retailers together, and we advertise for them and include the Hardy Boy with their name. We give them the signage for their material so they can make displays."

To encourage brand recognition and consumer loyalty, Gerace makes sure the Hardy Boy logo is on all of their pots. "People look for the red package or red pot and packs, and they know it came from us."

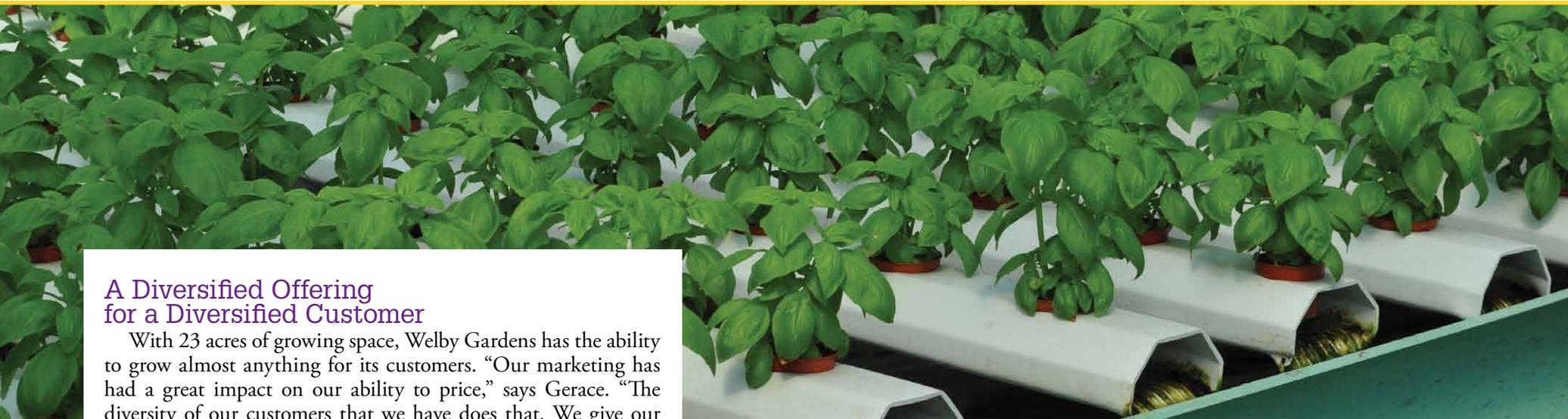
Did You Know?

About 20 percent of what Welby Gardens sells locally is picked up right off the floor at their main facility. The company developed this "pick and pack" program for its local customers who need on-demand replenishment in their garden centers or for landscape projects.

"Oftentimes, we'll have over 300 customers that come in a day, and they're not picking up just one or two flats," says Al Gerace. "They're picking up cartloads of plants."

"Our biggest push over the last 30 years has been to expand the market beyond spring."

— Al Gerace



A Diversified Offering for a Diversified Customer

With 23 acres of growing space, Welby Gardens has the ability to grow almost anything for its customers. “Our marketing has had a great impact on our ability to price,” says Gerace. “The diversity of our customers that we have does that. We give our customers a variety selection that they can’t get anywhere else.”

“In our wholesale division we offer around 3,500 different items,” he adds. “We have to have a lot of variety of annuals and perennials for our independent customers.”

On the company’s young plant side, Al estimates around 1,700 in their catalog. And that number is growing fast. “This year alone, we added 300 items,” says Gerace.

With such a large variety, it can become difficult for customers to pick and choose which items to add to their shopping list. So Welby Gardens has taken the guesswork out of it by creating various programs for different types of customers.

Gerace says the first thing a customer asks is, “What’s new?” To determine which varieties are the best performing new items out in the market, Welby Gardens holds its own trials and attends various trials across the country as well.

“We invite our clients, other growers in the area and the breeders to get together and see how the varieties are doing,” says Gerace. And from those trials, Gerace and company put together various programs to offer their customers.

“I think we had up to 18 programs for retailers this year,” he adds. Some of their programs focus on what’s new, containers, traditional tried-and-true, and hanging baskets.

One of Welby Garden’s programs was a result of drought. With weather being the biggest challenge for growers, Gerace worked to develop a line of plants that could withstand dry conditions.

Welby Gardens cooperated with the Gardens Centers of Colorado and initiated its XXX program for customers to select plants based on water requirements. With the company’s unique X-rating system, plants are rated from one X to three Xs to designate how much and how often they should be watered.

Year-Round Production

Although Welby Gardens has seen many updates and various levels of expansion over the years, one common factor remained constant — each expansion has been made with the intention to help encourage year-round production.

According to Gerace, spring seasons at Welby Gardens have always been successful, even through the recession. The biggest issue has been the shoulder of the season. “Retailers have been more conscious. And with the landscapers, if there’s a question on budgets, they get squeezed.”

“Until we can solidify that year-round demand, it’s very difficult to spend money on expansion,” says Gerace.

The company’s most recent addition to the business has been its organic and hydroponic basil, which has been quite profitable. Gerace adds, “Hydroponic basil, especially, has been enticing with consumers and they are happy with the product.” ■

Jasmina Dolce is managing editor of GPN’s Big Grower. She can be reached at jdolce@sgcmail.com or 847.391.1004.



Mixing it up

Unlike many growers, Welby Gardens mixes its own soil. “We use a mineral base to our soils so that it blends with the landscape soils,” says Dan Gerace, production manager.

Old soil is recycled, cleaned up and blended with sand and mineral soil. Then perlite is added at the last moment to ensure it does not get blown away. Lastly, fertilizer is added along with a bio-fungicide to help protect roots from disease.

“We’ve been working with the Soil and Plant Lab out of California since 1976,” says Al Gerace. “They come here religiously every month.”

Welby Gardens will send out samples for testing and will also perform in-house testing. According to Al, their growers’ No. 1 tool — besides a hose — is a meter to measure soil pH and EC levels.

Al adds, “We want the optimal potential for the growing out of the plants, because if we have a happy customer, they’re going to come back.”