

# Flower Power

**The Huntingtons run the state's largest horticultural business**

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FAMILY TIES: HENRY '80, FAR LEFT, AND JEFFREY HUNTINGTON '76, AT RIGHT IN THE OPPOSITE PHOTO, RUN THE NURSERY ENTERPRISE STARTED BY THEIR FATHER, JONATHAN '50, CENTER.

The rain drums against the lofty glass roof and streams down the sides of the greenhouse. Jeffrey Huntington '76, vice president of Pleasant View Gardens, a family-owned wholesale nursery in Loudon, N.H., is walking down the main aisle of the immense building on this late July day, surveying thousands of baskets of blooming flowers suspended overhead. The plants aren't supposed to be here; ordinarily, they

would have been shipped out to retail garden centers by now. But because of all the rain this year—almost 13 inches in June and July, without a single day between May 25 and July 5 officially recorded as sunny—garden centers are having a slow summer, orders are down and plants are piling up. It's ironic that a farmer who grows his crops under glass is still at the mercy of the weather.

Jeff takes it in stride, though. This is no big problem, he says. The greenhouse staff will pinch the plants back, let them grow out and bloom again, and in a few weeks they'll look even better than they do now. They will surely sell later in the summer.

Like most people who have worked in agriculture for any length of time, Jeff has learned to be philosophical about the weather. He can't change it, and he's seen worse. When? Well, there was the Blizzard of '78, for example. That was just about a year after his parents, Jon '50 and Eleanor, bought the nursery and moved their family up from Connecticut. Jeff was 22 at the time, a recent graduate of UNH's Thompson School of Applied Science. His brother, Henry '80, was just out of high school.

The blizzard was a classic Nor'easter, battering New England with hurricane-force winds and drifts of snow 10 feet high or more. It hit New Hampshire about midday on Feb. 6, and by evening the state was effectively shut down. At Pleasant View, the wind and snow were pummeling a 6,000-square-foot, plastic-covered greenhouse that sheltered thousands of cyclamen seedlings. Jon was concerned that the plastic would give way, so he decided to move the plants to a glass greenhouse.



JONATHAN SURVEYS HANGING BASKETS IN A PLEASANT VIEW GARDENS GREENHOUSE.

"With the help of a couple of our growers, Dad, Mom, Henry and I boxed up all the cyclamen," Jeff recalls. "It was dark, and the snow was blowing so hard you could hardly see outside. We were shoveling like mad to keep the driveway open between the two greenhouses. We'd back our truck up to the door, load it with plants, drive about 50 feet, back it into the other building, and unload it. On one trip, when we got to the second building, we realized Mom wasn't there. When we went to look for her, we found her lying in the middle of the driveway. The snow was so thick that no one had seen her fall. We were all shouting and scrambling through the snow to get to her. We got her up and she was OK, although she had been more or less knocked out by the fall. We worked through the night and into the early morning. We never lost the plastic, but that crop was too important to take a chance."

That's how the Huntingtons get things done: everybody pitches in, works hard and does whatever needs doing. That's how they built a small, two-greenhouse nursery into the largest wholesale nursery in New Hampshire and one of the largest in New England, with 13 acres of covered production area and 10 acres of outdoor gardens in two locations in Loudon and Pembroke. Pleasant View Gardens ships trays of young plants to wholesale growers in all 50 states, and it grows "finished" plants in pots for retail nurseries and garden centers throughout the Northeast, selling about 40 million plants a year altogether.

"In spite of the four-year difference in their ages, Jeff and Henry Huntington look so much alike that they could be twins. They are big men, built like football players—broad and square—with ready grins and contagious enthusiasm when they talk about the business they run together. Henry is president and chief executive officer of Pleasant View Gardens, overseeing marketing and administration. Jeff, as vice president and chief operating officer, focuses on production. Jon is still an active advisor. "I like to go to staff meetings. I just come down and criticize and go home," he says with a laugh.

Jeff and Henry have been working with plants all their lives. They grew up on a farm in Westport, Conn., that had been in their mother's family for generations. From the time they were 9 or 10 years old, they helped out in the greenhouses and gardens or at a roadside stand, where Jon and Eleanor sold fruits, vegetables and bedding plants grown on the farm, as well as produce supplied by other growers in the area. "When they were young, they were expected to work. I always believed that if you had children involved in your business, you had to give them responsibilities. They had to really be partners in it," Jon says.



GREEN THUMBS: PLEASANT VIEW

EMPLOYEES TEND TO THE DISPLAY

GARDENS IN LOUDON, N.H.

Even as a boy, Jeff loved growing things. "I always knew I wanted to be a farmer," he says. Henry wasn't so keen on the production side of the business, but he did enjoy working with customers and thinking about ways to offer more products, increase sales and do things more efficiently. Both of them feel fortunate to have been able to work alongside their parents and credit them with the success they have achieved at Pleasant View. "My parents have always led by example," Henry observes. "They taught us the value of hard work and the payoff that comes with it. They always encouraged us to make our own decisions, good or bad."

When the Huntingtons purchased Pleasant View in 1976, the nursery had just two small greenhouses and a handful of employees growing foliage plants for flower shops. People of a certain age might remember that the '70s were festooned with ferns, ficus and philodendrons. Many restaurants and offices, as well as homes, looked like mini-rainforest ecosystems. "There were flower shops or plant stores on every corner back then. Everybody was selling green plants," Jon recalls. "I could see a real opportunity there."

Jon's plan was to expand both the selection of products offered by the nursery and the geographic range of its market. "When I had the roadside market in Connecticut, I used to go into New York and buy every conceivable fruit and vegetable—stuff no one else had," he recalls. Customers would come from far afield to shop at a market where they knew they would find both quality and novelty. Jon thought he could grow his new business the same way: by offering varieties of foliage plants that had never before been available to flower shops in the area. "The vision was to create a kind of Boston Market in foliage plants for northern New England," he explains.

The new business started off strong. The market for foliage plants was as good as Jon had hoped, and the Huntingtons started broadening their product line to include annual flowers and potted plants. But just as they were getting established, the future of their business was threatened by an unanticipated jump in energy prices. Jon recalls watching the price of heating oil soar from 17 cents a gallon to \$1.17 in the late '70s. "We were burning \$1,000 a night, and our business was just starting to grow," he says. "We had some tough years."

The oil crisis was a wake-up call for the whole industry, Jeff observes. "A lot of people don't like to change, but we had no choice. We had to become more efficient." In Europe, where labor costs were considerably higher, greenhouse growers were already using new technology to lower the cost of production, but the Huntingtons were among the first to bring that technology to the United States. They imported seeding machines and automatic pot fillers and started growing annuals in cell packs, increasing the speed of production by 10 to 20 times. Their sales of annuals began to take off, outstripping the foliage business.

At the same time, the Huntingtons were restructuring the way they worked with customers. "In the early years, 95 percent of our customers would drive out to Pleasant View, pick out the plants they wanted, get a handwritten sales receipt and drive away," Jeff says. As sales volume increased and the nursery operation became more complicated, they could no longer have customers showing up at random and wandering through the greenhouses. They started handling sales over the phone—and later over the Internet—and shipping orders by truck.

Some changes were hard. For example, while the sales volume for bedding plants was soaring in the 1980s, the demand for foliage plants dropped off, and the Huntingtons reluctantly decided to give them up. "Foliage was taking up valuable space we needed, so we made the decision to get out of it," Jeff explains. But Jon observes, somewhat wistfully, "I enjoyed the foliage. We used to do a trailer and a half a week in foliage from Florida."

The Huntingtons were always looking for exciting plants to add to the Pleasant View catalog, and in the mid-1980s they came across some new introductions that were really special. They were hybrid varieties of New Guinea impatiens, developed primarily by German plant breeder Ludwig Kientzler. His patented selections came from cuttings rather than seeds, and only growers licensed by Kientzler could propagate them. They were the first patented plants to be widely distributed by the nursery industry, and they were an immediate hit with gardeners.



In 1992, Henry got together with Kientzler and the owners of two other nurseries, one in California and one in Michigan, to create a partnership that would seek out and develop other new patented plants for U.S. gardens. The partnership was launched under the name Proven Winners. "The idea was to introduce exceptional new plants that are easy to grow, that would be successful for both the growers and the homeowners, and that would grow almost anywhere in the U.S.," Henry says. "We started out with four varieties, and from there it just exploded."

Today Proven Winners is the biggest brand in the nursery industry and a name familiar to every dedicated gardener. The company has introduced some 400 plant selections over the past 17 years, of which 250 are currently available at garden centers throughout the country. A complementary brand, Proven Selections, includes some 400 regional-favorite flower varieties. At the retail level, sales of Proven Winners and Proven Selections total more than a half-billion dollars a year.

In retrospect, Henry thinks that becoming part of Proven Winners was the single most important business decision he and his family have made. "It has become the crux of our business, but that wasn't something we could foresee at the time. We just realized that it was an opportunity, and we took it," he says.

Proven Winners plants are exceptional in a number of ways. Not only are they specifically selected for superior flowering, growth habit and disease resistance, but they are rigorously tested at trial stations around the country to make certain they will perform well under a wide range of conditions. Of some 3,200 plants tested for introduction next year, Jeff says, only about 20 will be good enough to make it into the catalog.

Each Proven Winners variety is propagated through tissue culture, so there is clean, new stock every year. Cuttings are produced at a 10-acre greenhouse complex in Costa Rica and sent in packages of 50 to Pleasant View and the other growers, where they are rooted in plugs of soil. Most are then sold to wholesale growers in trays of 50 to 84 plants. The remainder are transplanted into pots and grown out to become "finished" plants, which are sold to retail garden centers. Great pains are taken to guarantee that

disease isn't introduced anywhere along the line, from propagator to the home garden. "We test to ensure that this is so," says Henry.



From the beginning, the Huntingtons and their partners were determined to compete on quality and service, not price. Premium pricing meant that everyone down the marketing chain—wholesalers, retail garden centers and home gardeners—had to recognize the added value in a Proven Winners plant. "We were the first to create a consumer brand for bedding-plant products," Henry says, noting that the brand inspires loyalty among devoted gardeners who are willing to pay more for products that help them be successful.

Proven Winners has been credited with expanding the number of plant species available to American gardeners, including some that most gardeners had never heard of before. The increasing popularity of container gardening is also due at least in part to Proven Winners' idea of selling combinations of plants that go particularly well together. "If you bought a planter or a hanging basket at a garden center 10 or 15 years ago, it would have probably contained just one kind of plant. It's amazing what is being done with container combinations today," Henry observes.

The trade magazine *Greenhouse Grower*, which selected Pleasant View for its 2004 Grower of the Year award, has described Proven Winners as "a revolutionary force in the industry" and cited Jeff and Henry for their ability "to always stay on the leading edge, while growing and adapting their business to meet demands." Brett Andrus, president of the New Hampshire Growers Association, concurs. He is the nursery manager at Churchill's Gardens in Exeter, N.H., one of Pleasant View's larger customers for finished plants, so he speaks from personal experience. "The Huntingtons have done so much to raise the standards of horticulture in New Hampshire and across the country," he says. "Over the past 15 years, they have shown many smaller operations how to bring their business to a higher level."

With the rapid growth of Proven Winners and Proven Selections, Pleasant View outgrew its Loudon location, and in 1998 the Huntingtons built a new facility on the site of a reclaimed sand pit in Pembroke. In 2005 the nursery expanded again, and six highly automated greenhouses were built at Loudon, replacing a number of smaller, outdated structures. And just this year, construction was completed on a \$2 million biomass plant

that now heats all the greenhouses in Pembroke, reducing Pleasant View's fuel oil consumption by 250,000 gallons a year.

The image brought to mind by the word "greenhouse" doesn't match the reality at Pleasant View. Imagine standing in a greenhouse the size of a football field, connected by large sliding doors to five other greenhouses just as big. These are just the newest greenhouses at the Loudon location, which has about 8.5 acres under cover. The Pembroke facility has another greenhouse complex that encloses 4.5 acres. In addition, there are outdoor nursery beds and trial gardens, warehouse-size buildings for shipping and receiving and storing supplies, and of course the wood-fueled biomass plant.

During the peak production season—January to June—some 250 employees work at Pleasant View, planting and tending trays of tiny plants that are set out on the concrete floors of the greenhouses like living carpets. They can plant, label and set out 500 trays an hour. Electric forklifts beep-beep-beep up and down the miles of aisles between sections of trays, moving plants in and out.

Later in the season, the trays of cuttings—called "liners" in the trade—are joined by hundreds of thousands of labeled plastic pots, neatly arranged in sections according to plant variety. Hanging planters, many already in bloom, create a suspended garden over the greenhouse aisles, where they won't cast a shadow on the plants below. Jeff says that liners account for about 65 percent of Pleasant View's total sales, with finished plants making up the rest.

Much of the routine work of caring for the plants is handled by automated systems supplying water and fertilizer through sprayers that travel up and down the rows on overhead rails. The water is pumped from a holding tank beneath the building, and it drains back to the tank through holes in the floor to be filtered and used again. In these greenhouses, one person can do the work that a dozen might have done years ago.

Despite all the growth and change that has occurred at Pleasant View over the past three decades, the character of the family business hasn't really changed at all. The company's mission statement—"At Pleasant View Gardens, we are growing a more beautiful world through innovation, superior plant programs, and a commitment to our customers' success"—reflects the same ideals and principles that Jon and Eleanor always upheld.



*STAFF MEMBERS CHECK ON LINERS—TRAYS OF SMALL PLANTS THAT ARE SOLD TO WHOLESALERS.*

Many family businesses run into trouble when it is time for one generation to pass on leadership to the next. That wasn't a problem at Pleasant View, because Jon never hesitated to share decision-making and responsibility. In fact, the change seemed to occur naturally over a period of time. "I just took longer and longer vacations, and the boys took more responsibility, and I was glad to have them do it. Then one morning I came in and my desk was out in the yard," Jon says with a laugh.

It's still a multigenerational business. Jon keeps an eye on things from his house across the road from the Loudon greenhouses, and Jeff's 26-year-old son, Ben, became part of the management team about a year ago. He's running a new pick-up greenhouse in Pembroke, where landscapers and buyers from area garden centers can come in, choose the plants they want and take them away, just like in the old days.

Between them, Henry and Jeff have five children, all boys, and although Ben is the only one currently working at Pleasant View, they hope that others will join them in the future. Ben thinks that's likely and he looks forward to it. The five boys grew up in neighboring houses next to the nursery and across the road from their grandparents—they call their neighborhood Huntingtonville—and like their fathers, they worked side by side in the gardens and greenhouses from childhood. Ben feels particularly fortunate to have been able to work with his grandfather as he was growing up. "He's my idol," he says.

"We've told all of our kids that we'd like nothing better than to have them here," Jeff says. "But if they want to have a leadership role, we expect them to go to college first, and then they have to work for somebody else. That gives them a chance to learn something from someone else and get some experience. Then they can make their own decision about whether they want to come back."

"Our parents never forced us into the business," Henry adds. "It was our choice, and I think that's important. It would be great to have our sons here, but there's no pressure

and no guilt if they decide to do something else. Whatever they choose to do, we hope they'll be passionate about it." ~

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**ALUMNI**



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