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Tom



HEAD GROWER OF THE YEAR

**Tom Wheeler Builds A Strong
Operation, One Grower At A Time**

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Building A Strong Foundation, One Grower At A Time

Greenhouse Grower's 2015 Head Grower Of The Year Tom Wheeler is laying a strong groundwork for the industry by mentoring future growers and instilling a sense of pride in growing quality crops.

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TOM Wheeler of Bell Nursery, USA (Burtonsville, Md.), *Greenhouse Grower's* 2015 Head Grower Of The Year and winner of its Excellence In Leadership award, works hard, leads by example, never cuts corners and refuses to compromise on top quality — all the characteristics of a great leader. Perhaps most important for our industry, he is a natural-born mentor, well-suited to cultivating future growers.

Heading Down The Grower Path

During his sophomore year in high school, Wheeler started dating Teresa Pack. Almost immediately, Teresa's father asked Wheeler if he would like to work in the greenhouse division of his family business. Little did Wheeler know that this would be

the start of his love of growing.

But his greater love remained Teresa, the high school sweetheart he later married.

Butch Pack would not only become Wheeler's father-in-law, but also his mentor and one of the defining influences in his life.

"Butch Pack gave me my start in the industry," Wheeler says. "He was a strong leader with traditional values and a driven work ethic. He always preached hard work. Butch Pack was a huge part of the local industry, as well as the community. He impacted a lot of people in a very positive way."

After graduation from the University of Maryland in 1986, Wheeler became the head grower at Terra Nursery.

He says it was a privilege to work with such a great team at Terra Nursery, and gives thanks to his wife Teresa, sons Thomas and Shane and daughter Brooke for their constant support over the years.

Also, to his parents who taught him to always strive to set a good example, work hard and be a leader.

Wheeler's sons have followed in his footsteps and now run their own wholesale growing operation, TSB Enterprises in southern Maryland.

During his time at Terra Nursery, Wheeler spent a year contract growing for Bell Nursery, which led to his appointment as head grower there.

"I have always loved growing and being a part of the industry," Wheeler says. "I have been fortunate to have been influenced by some really great folks from the start of my career to where I am today."

A Hard-Working Team Makes The Operation

At the Evening Of Excellence reception held during Cultivate'15, Wheeler attributed his success to the entire Bell Nursery team, saying he couldn't do half of what he does

without their hand work.

Bell Nursery, No. 6 on *Greenhouse Grower's* Top 100 Growers list, supplies ornamental bedding plants, container perennials, mums and poinsettias to The Home Depot.

With around 7,400,000 square feet of greenhouse space to manage, Wheeler counts on his team to keep things running smoothly. In addition to being in charge of in-house production, he is also responsible for Bell's network of farm families, which encompasses more than 50 acres of production in Maryland.

"As your operation grows, delegation becomes more important, as does your team," Wheeler says. "At Bell, we all have an 'Act like you own it' attitude, which helps to ensure top quality production."

The team at Bell Nursery grows in an environmentally and socially responsible manner. Wheeler had a big hand in the company's qualification as a Veriflora-certified sustainable producer. In addition to making changes in the overall culture that surrounds sustainable production, by taking advantage of Echo systems and drip irrigation, etc, he reduced runoff and cut water use at the operation by nearly 70 percent. And his aggressive integrated pest management and recycling programs succeeded in reducing chemical usage and minimizing waste throughout the company.

In 2014, Wheeler designed a program to grow neonicotinoid-free to help Bell gain a better understanding of the difficulties this type of large-scale production might present and to start addressing them to find solutions. Thanks to his full understanding of the subject, the management team at Bell Nursery has had a considerable impact on the dialogue within the growing and retail community, as well as on a local, state and federal level.



Wheeler has a knack for bringing out the best in people. L to R: Section grower Zulema Calderon, Tom Wheeler and section growers Estela Ramirez and Erica Barron.

Cultivating New Growers

Bell Nursery started its internship program two years ago with the aim of identifying and training the growers of the future. Each season, the company's internships give interns a broad overview of the company. They are exposed to everything from growing and production to distribution, retail and finances.

Tom Wheeler, head grower at Bell and *Greenhouse Grower's* 2015 Head Grower Of The Year, along with Cole Mangum, vice president of production, is intimately involved with developing the intern program and recruiting new growers.

"We want to become an industry magnet for interns," he says. "Cole and I are in the process of developing our internship program and taking it to the next level, reaching out to universities and different folks like the American Floral Endowment and other Universities to help us put together a top notch internship program."

Many of Bell's plans for future internships have come out of talking to other organizations. One good way to attract young growers, Wheeler says, is to get to know the advisors at universities and schools of agriculture, so they can get the word out about the opportunities you offer.

To inquire about internships at Bell Nursery, contact Tom Wheeler (Tom@Bellnursery.com) or Cole Mangum (Cole.Mangum@Bellnursery.com).

Wheeler generously shared what he learned with his peers and has been instrumental in helping others gain a better understanding of the challenges they will face with less access to neonicotinoids.

"We wanted to prepare ourselves. But in no way do we want to send the wrong message to the industry," Wheeler says.

"We want the message from Bell to be to help fund the research, listen to what the research finds and support the science."

Innovation Requires Taking It Slow

With his 30-plus years of experience as a grower, Wheeler usually

knows what works best for a crop, but keeps an open mind about trying new things.

"I try to not go too far outside of what works," he says. "That said, we are always looking for ways to tweak a crop and dial it in, constantly looking to improve quality, shelf life, genetics, mixes, etc. When we try something new, I am lucky to have a strong team behind me."

Wheeler achieves this by keeping good records and taking baby steps.

"We take lots of pictures of the crops at different stages and keep detailed notes about what works and what doesn't."

Taking small steps when trialing something new, gives Wheeler time to tweak and change things as needed. He stays innovative through personal study, research and seeking input about new technology and growing techniques from his peers, as well as taking advantage of the technological expertise of breeder and tech reps



Bell Nursery grows in an environmentally and socially responsible manner and is a Veriflora-certified sustainable producer.

in the industry. At the end of each year, he meets with his growers to review what techniques worked best and what can be done differently.

This process is not unlike the one Wheeler says he used to develop himself as a grower.

"The first thing I did as a grower was listen; listen to folks who had been around and pay attention," he says. "It is important to build a knowledge base about new technology and new genetics, so I asked a lot of questions, read up on industry research, paid attention to detail and kept good notes."

Quality in operations acquired by Bell has substantially improved thanks to Wheeler's efforts, to the point that shipped quality from any Bell facility is the same, regardless of location. Moreover, Bell's primary customer has acknowledged Wheeler as the absolute "Best In Class" grower.

"I never cut corners," Wheeler says. "You have to be willing to do what it takes to put out a top quality crop."

Wheeler Mentors With Empowerment

Bell Nursery is the type of operation that doesn't sacrifice quality for a price point, and oftentimes, a quality crop is only as good as the team that cares for it. Wheeler is directly responsible for building and developing that growing team. It comes as no surprise that one of his greatest assets as a leader is his ability to bring out the best in those who come under his tutelage.

He believes strongly in developing

Bell's employees for the long term, and has a true gift for inspiring those who work for him.

"Tom instills a sense of pride in his growers by producing some of the best possible plants," says Cole Mangum, Bell's vice president of production. "The growing team is proud to take ownership of the product and wants to replicate that sense of achievement each and every time a new crop comes into their care."

Where Wheeler shines most is in developing and building up other growers. He says he especially enjoys working with younger growers. When he finds a grower who shows passion, has a good work ethic and a strong desire to learn, he says he knows he has found a keeper.

"Different traits bring value," he says. "It can be a young kid out of college with a good work ethic, who is bright and energetic, or it can be someone who has been in the industry a while with instinct and some experience. If he or she takes pride in their work, has passion for the job and a good work ethic, you have a grower to mold."

Wheeler spends several days a week with new growers, walking crops together, asking questions and feeling out their instincts. He guides them from the point of telling them exactly how and what to do and why, progressing to where it is a mutual decision, and ultimately to "letting them take the ball and run with it."

He says once he develops growers, he likes to empower and help them take a sense of pride and ownership in their crops.

"One of the most satisfying parts of my job is to walk a crop, especially with a young grower, at different stages. I love talking it through with a grower and seeing things click," Wheeler says. "When you see a pristine, untouched crop just before it is finished,



Wheeler believes strongly in developing Bell Nursery's employees for the long term. He is pictured here with Kevin Titherington (right), general manager at the Burtonsville, Md., facility.

it is really satisfying. It provides a great opportunity to praise a young grower for a job well done."

Wheeler says he has pushed to aggressively recruit young growers at Bell Nursery (see "Cultivating New Growers").

"I want them [aspiring new growers] to know that the door is open at Bell Nursery to come, and you will be given a chance," he says.

Windows Of Opportunity Come As Part Of A Great Team

Wheeler says he feels lucky to have had the opportunities he has at Bell and is grateful to work with such an extraordinary management team.

Wheeler says he is thankful for the opportunities that Bell has afforded him, including the opportunity to see the industry, meet many wonderful professionals within the industry and develop a number of great relationships.

"I have always looked up to Gary Mangum [president and CEO]. He is truly one-of-a-kind and an icon in the industry," he says. "Gary is the best at what he does. I would like to thank him and Mike McCarthy for being such visionaries."

Wheeler says these two men, along with his father-in-law, have had a major impact on his development as a grower.

"I am also thankful to work at a company with such a great leadership team including Vinny Scalsea [CFO], Steve Crider [CFO], Brett Guthrie [VP] and Cole Mangum [VP]."

Wheeler is adamant that he accepts the Head Grower of the Year award on behalf of the entire team at Bell Nursery.

"I am part of a great team. I take pride in my piece of the business — the growing side, the growing team and the product we put out," he says. "It is because of the great team we have from top to bottom. I am just a part of that."



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