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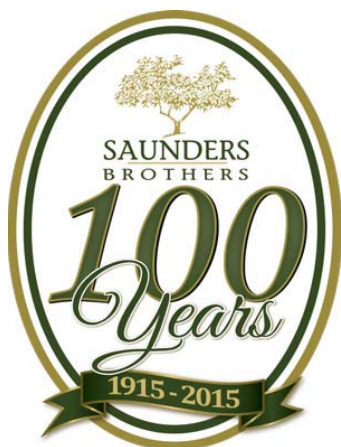
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Membership

January 11, 2016
10:11 AM ET

Member Spotlight: Saunders Brothers

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Robert Saunders, Sales Manager
Piney River, Virginia

Family business was never a truer reality than at Saunders where four of seven brothers carry on the farming tradition begun by their grandfather and his brothers. Saunders Brothers, Inc. celebrated 100 years in 2015, but they'll tell you the legacy goes back even further than that. (It turns out that their family legacy also involves graduate after graduate from Virginia Tech!) While each brother has his own story of how they ended up in the family business, all stand on the principles of family, passion, integrity, and faith, which has proven to be the backbone of their success. We caught up with Robert Saunders, sales manager, just before Christmas.

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Tell us a little bit about Saunders' history and background.

The land we're on today is the same land my grandfather began farming over 100 years ago. At that time, it was row crop farming and cattle, which evolved through the depression and into the 1940s to become a peach farm. In the 1940s, there was a huge demand for peaches, and peaches are what brought the business through the 1960s and 1970s.

In the meantime, my dad, Paul Saunders, had started a 4-H project in the 1940s propagating boxwood. This initiated a nursery business that really rode on the sidelines until the mid-1980s. In the 1990s, the nursery business became a large part of our business, while fruit took the backseat. This is how it has continued to this day, with boxwood being nearly 150 acres of our field production.

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"It's what our members want. We have surveyed our members, spoken with them, and finally asked them to cast a ballot. Each time they told us they want a national association that unifies and serves the entire horticulture industry."

Mark Foertmeyer
 Foertmeyer & Sons Greenhouse
 Delaware, Ohio





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While we sell our plant material wholesale, our retail market is what our community sees as the face of the company, even though it is a small part of what we do. Our market is a destination, drawing people from nearly 100 miles. We used to pick our peaches almost solely for the commercial market, but having the farm market has allowed us to leave the fruit on the tree a little longer and, therefore, improving the quality of what we offer our customers.

On the nursery side, which is where the business is strongest, we constantly strive to produce the highest quality plant, to grow the varieties that are good and new, and to offer plants that perform in the landscape. We travel frequently to evaluate new material and see what actually works. Concerning boxwood, we have our own trial of about 150 varieties, a few of which are very cool and show great promise.



What sets Saunders apart?

Family is a part of our mission statement, and it really defines who we are from the people who carry the name itself to the employees that have

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been with us for 30 years and are bringing their own family members into this business. We have husband and wife teams, father and son, mother and daughter, and sibling teams. We have one gentleman who has been with us for over 50 years.

Our success is attributed to our employees and the loyalty of our customers. We want our customers to be our friends, and we treat them as such. If we stumble – which we will and do – it's not the end of the world when you have strong relationships. We're able to fix the situation and move on stronger for it. We're sincere and genuine with what we do, and our customers see that. We are who we are, and we stand behind everything we do. We hold high morals. We stake trust in our reputation. And if we say something, we mean it. It's rewarding and amazing to see customer relationships have grown and evolved over the years as our businesses have grown and evolved. While we're always making new relationships, we have a strong core of businesses in the mid-Atlantic that we've been selling plants to for more than 30 years.

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What are Saunders' goals and visions for the future?

For the next generation of "Saunders," who are not necessarily Saunders, the goals are to stay in the lead, to maintain energy, and to stay on the forefront of providing plant varieties that add value, perform well, and are backed by quality.

We want our company to continue to be aggressive. We want to stay on the front of the new "good" stuff. I don't think enough people are doing that. We're challenging the company to be and stay aggressive. We could easily start slowing down, but we're growing, and we don't want to slow down. We have to keep that happening and maintain the standards that have gotten us to this point into the future.

What are some of Saunders' biggest challenges, and what are your strategies to achieve success?

Finding labor has been a huge challenge. We use the H2-A program, and the availability of labor in the future scares us. We cannot function without that labor force — it's imperative to have them. This is their second home. We've had many work here for nearly 20 years; they already know the jobs. When they leave for the winter and return in the spring, it's like they were off for the weekend and are back again. Our county is at 4 percent unemployment, so we don't have options otherwise. We're out in the middle of nowhere, so it's hard to get good managers in here as well.

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We're always asking the scary questions – will the labor programs continue to work? Can we continue handling government regulation? What is EPA going to do? Where do we ride in the space of available chemicals and rising water challenges? How much more can they keep ratcheting up wage rates?

Water is another challenge. We're doing all we can to make irrigation more efficient. We're collaborating with the University of Florida on a new program that monitors water usage and needs. We've had close to a 50 percent reduction in water use as well as significant reduction in disease and fertilizer use with this program.

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What have some of your greatest successes been in the last few years?

We've been so fortunate to hire great people that are not 'Saunders'. They have been so key to the success we have had.

Boxwood blight could easily be seen as a major problem; however we have turned it into an opportunity to focus on genetics and varieties and to find new and existing plants that will set us apart. We have supported and, at times, spearheaded research in boxwood blight, and this has allowed us to be a communication channel with our customers and others looking for information.

This irrigation work with the University of Florida in Gainesville has been huge for us — it's pretty cutting edge. For several years, we have recorded a variety of data including temperature, wind, precipitation, plant information, and plant weight in early morning as well as at sunset. This weight data tells us evaporation and transpiration that have occurred throughout the day, and helps us predict how much water we will need to replace for the next day based on forecasted weather.

New varieties, along with being in the right place at the right time with the right people, have defined success for us over the past 100 years. The people on our team, as well as our customers, have so many resources and ideas that all come together to create success. As a team, we make great connections that lead to new opportunities.

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From a business perspective, we've also grown successfully through the generations. The current Saunders brothers run the company as a group, but we run our departments individually. We have a "brother meeting" once a month and talk about everything that's going on. We're all sailing our ships, and we're all making sure business is getting done while at the same time being aware of what's going on within the entire company. The brothers getting along is rare in family business. Undoubtedly, there are bad days, but we make it through them and move forward for the good of the company. We can bounce ideas off of one another, chew it up, and think about it before moving forward. All of the quick triggers and slow triggers average out, and we make a good team with the same values and goals for the future.

How does being an AmericanHort member benefit Saunders?

Being a member keeps us abreast of what's happening out there — water, labor, EPA, pesticides, everything. Craig Regelbrugge does such a good job of keeping us informed of the issues that impact our business, whether that's labor or the EPA. The advocacy of AmericanHort is also a huge benefit – they do things on a national level to help the entire industry like the Grow Wise, Bee Smart pollinator initiative. Being a member allows us to stay on top of everything and to help settle fears and major customer concerns. That's been huge to us. We also attend Cultivate every year and NextLevel most years. Those opportunities to learn and network are very valuable.

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