

Growing flowering plants that brighten people's day

By PADMA NAGAPPAN
For the Capital Press

John and Janet Kister worked for retail garden centers and nurseries 10 years before deciding to go into business for themselves in 1985, when they began Sunlet Nursery in Fallbrook, in Southern California's Mediterranean climate.

They specialize in growing indoor and outdoor flowering plants and foliage, and ship all over the country. They started on a small scale, with 5 acres and just the two of them working on it. Sunlet has now expanded to 25 acres.

"We grew at a very even pace, not too fast, not too slow," Janet Kister said. "Something we could handle. We purposely did it at a very controlled pace."

This deliberate and pragmatic approach has helped them thrive for over 30 years in the industry.

"In the beginning, we didn't know what each year would bring. We were lucky that we weren't wrong on our calls," she said.

In the early years, the challenges were more external than internal, she recalled, such as surviving a couple of droughts, and learning to reduce water use, which they did by switching to drip irrigation.

She handles sales and finance, while John is in charge of production. She credits him with being a good grower. They complement each other's roles, providing input to help the other make sound decisions. While he focuses on growing, he also has a good marketing sense and will weigh in on decisions, while she taps her knowledge of the market to suggest ideas for production.

Sunlet ships to home and garden stores, supermarkets, wholesale florists, amusement parks, wholesalers and brokers, specializing in flowering plants that are somewhat harder to grow, such as spring cactus, campanula and canter berry bells.

"We are in the upper end of midsize nurseries in San Diego County, which has one of the largest nursery industries in the country," Kister said.

Given the critical mass of nurseries in San Diego, vendors are able to easily send supplies to nurseries like Sunlet, helping reduce costs and transportation time. The same holds for when they ship to customers, since there is established infrastructure in place that makes for a smooth flow.

Kister credits their longevity in the industry to being very well informed about regulations and trends, and remaining in compliance. Running a business ethically is key to building trust, with employees, banks, vendors and buyers, she



Sunlet Nursery

Janet and John Kister started Sunlet Nursery 33 years ago in Fallbrook, Calif.

said. Ensuring high quality and offering good customer service helps build long-lasting rapport with customers.

"A lot of companies don't do follow through, but we do. We ensure the customer is happy, that our quality is good and it works well for them," she said.

They also attend trade shows to check out the latest trends and varieties of plants, and read trade journals to keep up. Sales trends dictate much of what they grow, so John works on plants that are in demand.

Her day begins by taking care of customer needs, and the planning needed for specific customers. The rest of her day depends on the demands of the week, which can be a mix of planning future production numbers, reviewing finances, doing payroll and long-term planning.

She also spends time working to get up to speed on regulations, what's changing and connecting with the right people to see what needs to be done.

Regarding the outlook for the nursery industry, she said she is cautiously optimistic.

"I worry about the added cost of doing business in California due to labor laws, the high price of water and utilities, invasive pests, and complying with regulations that most of our competition throughout the country do not have to deal with. But on the flip side, we sell a beautiful product that creates smiles. There will always be a market for that."



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