

Olive Hill Greenhouses keeps growing

By PADMA NAGAPPAN
For the Capital Press

Tony Godfrey's grandparents were all farmers in the Midwest, but his father was a machinist who moved the family to California for a job.

Tony needed to make money to go to college, so he began working in a retail nursery as a high school senior.

"I didn't know much about the business but I could see the owner enjoyed his work," he said. This influenced him to study ornamental horticulture in college, where he continued to work at nurseries close by and in a greenhouse, so he could afford to take classes.

The greenhouse experience got him interested in growing tropical plants, and he also liked that he could work inside a warm structure with concrete floors. He worked his way to San Diego County, ending up in the agricultural hub of Fallbrook. In 1973, a friend with



Olive Hill Greenhouses

Olive Hill Greenhouses founder Tony Godfrey has expanded his business from 2 acres to 120 acres, with 18 acres of greenhouses and 27 acres of palm trees.

a struggling nursery business rented two acres to Godfrey, who built his own greenhouse and began growing tothos and cordatum, types of ornamental philodendron.

When he began doing

well, the friend sold him all 20 acres a couple years later, and he built more greenhouses and gradually added other varieties of plants such as Boston ferns and grotons. He named his nursery Olive

Hill Greenhouses — olivehill.net — and his wife, Sue, helped him run it while keeping her day job.

Today his daughter Denise and her husband, William McGregor, have joined

the business, which has expanded to 120 acres, with 18 acres of greenhouses and 27 acres of palm trees. He is waiting for the market to improve before going forward with a 20-acre expansion of greenhouses.

"There were challenges in the early years, but the bankers who give ag credit really helped you," he recalled.

Olive Hill is one of the largest indoor plant producers and has made it to the Greenhouse Grower Top 100 grower list. They sell mostly to wholesalers, employ about 80 people, and deliver products within Southern California in their own trucks. They also ship across the Western U.S., the Midwest and Texas. Its slogan, "Pollution-fighting live plants for a healthier home and office environment," embodies its niche market.

Technology helps his family keep a close eye on all their greenhouses.

While he spoke, a greenhouse computer sent him an alert that it was getting hot inside and the temperature needed to be adjusted. It will also alert him if it's not getting a signal from a sensor, and he will send someone to check it.

When he began the nursery, he used thermostats, which helped determine when to run the greenhouse exhaust fans. But they were often glitchy and would not turn heaters off immediately when the temperature went above the norm of 72 degrees.

Once they installed computers, the nursery saved \$5,000 a month in natural gas bills because they respond much more promptly.

His daughter and son-in-law joined the business in 2000.

"She went with me on deliveries when she was little, but she didn't work for me before then. I told her to find something she enjoys and don't feel like she had to take it over. She finally came to us saying she was studying physics but would rather be growing plants. Her dorm room used to have 50 plants," he recalled with a chuckle.

Denise is now in charge of sales, general management and special projects like installing new software. William has taken over more and more from Godfrey, and shuttles between the original greenhouses and the newer ones, which are spread across several parcels of land that are not contiguous.

"The two of them brought us into the 21st century with a good website," Godfrey said. His wife, Sue, helps part-time while he focuses on production, and works closely with Denise, who gives him customer input.

Aside from philodendrons, anthuriums have taken off, while bromeliads have slowed down a little.

The best part of being in the nursery business is "doing what you enjoy doing," he said. "Growing plants is fun and I never really expected to make much money out of it, but it's been good."

Max Yield From the Ground Up

Soil preparation equipment from TG Schmeiser is engineered to provide maximum productivity per acre. Versatile implements till, mulch, cultivate and firm the soil for optimum seed germination.

Better Soil Prep For a Higher Yield



30' Till and Bedder™
Seed Bed Maker

T. G. SCHMEISER®

1-800-288-8128 • www.tgschmeiser.com



IRRIGATION EQUIPMENT

BOUGHT. SOLD. RENTAL.

Design of Effluent Handling Systems

- Gates, Valves & Aerators

New & Used Parts

- Aluminum Pipe • Certa-lok
- Siphon Tubes • HDPE
- Sand Media Filters
- Wheel Lines • Pumps

PACIFIC
SOUTHWEST IRRIGATION

Office: (209) 460-0450

Fax: (209) 982-1832

www.pacsouthwestirr.com

Carlos (209) 481-7677

Jim (209) 986-0099

N18-1/102

N18-1/102