Keeping ahead of curve with efficient, year-round practices

by Kelly Gates

If you scanned the farmer's market, your eyes would inevitably be drawn to the stand manned by Jim's Produce. Not just because the vegetables sold there are so fresh and vibrant. But because owner Jim Muck and his staff are always outfitted in white shirts, bow ties and straw hats.

According to Muck, they dress this way because of his wife's family.

"My wife Amanda and her family hail from western Washington where back in the day, they were green grocers," said Jim. "They always dressed in black pants, white shirts, bow ties and straw hats. We used to show up to farmer's markets in jeans and t-shirts, but when we decided to dress so we set ourselves apart, it just made sense to do what Amanda's family always did."

At times, customers call Jim "The Bowtie Organic Guy." He doesn't mind the nickname. If it draws attention, it's worth the extra effort and tongue-in-cheek alias, he added.

While the wardrobe choice comes from her side of the family, the farm itself has been in Muck's family since 1851. Located in Wheatland, CA, Jim's Produce was founded in 2001 by Jim and his wife Amanda Johnson and was the first vegetable operation to ever function there.

"Our initial plantings were in and amongst 100-year old olive trees near my parent's house, making use of the space between the trees, which are now just ornamental," Jim told Country Folks Grower. "Eventually, we took out some older walnut trees in a lower part of the property and moved much of our vegetable production there since there is more water and deeper soil."

In the early years, exotic melons were the main crop grown there. Today, there is around five acres in production at Jim's Produce, including approximately 40 different varieties of vegetables.

The moderate climate in California makes it the perfect place to grow year round. The summer months are typically the busiest though, with harvesting taking place virtually every day.

"We harvest heirloom tomatoes every morning in the summer months and we harvest other vegetables most days, we plant other days and in between, we work in the orchard, mow and do other general maintenance tasks," said Jim. "We like to use each space of the farm at least twice yearly. Short crops like lettuce, beets and cabbage can be planted and harvested multiple times annually."

One of the advantages of having 10 acres in total is having the ability to continually have a full five acres in production. When the timing is right, a vegetable can be harvested, the space cleared and prepped, and another planting can take place immediately after.

Dressing in bow ties and straw hats is part of a family tradition, inherited from owner Jim Muck's in-laws who were green grocers in western Washington.

Photo by Joan Kark-Wren

However, there are times when too many plants are still producing vegetables to start anew in the same space. So, the staff at Jim's Produce — mostly Jim, a full time employee, and several hired workers during peak season — must sometimes locate another area on the farm and plant a new batch of the same vegetables there.

"We're also harvesting so much that we can't always get around to tilling under and readying the recently-used space, so we find a patch of land that is already prepped and plant there to save time and energy," noted Jim. "There's always some acreage ready to be planted since we disc everything in the spring, spread amendments and rototill twice to get the soil in top shape before the busy season begins. We form up beds in the fall and spread compost over the entire area, plus we also have the option of working in feather meal as a nitrogen source too."

Much of the acreage that is not planted in September is filled with cover crop to help replenish the vital nutrients and minerals needed for the following year's crops.

While the lower fields at Jim's Produce get too cold in the winter to effectively grow vegetables, the higher land is perfect for kale, brussel sprouts, parsnips, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots and other winter varieties. Around one acre is dedicated to an assortment of nearly all veggie varieties, with half an acre just for carrots, one of the farm's more popular items this time of the year.

With this thought-out plan in place, Jim's Produce's winter sales rival that of its summer sales. At farmer's markets, the farm is one of few that continues selling produce later in the year when others have shifted to selling value-added products almost exclusively.

Along with farmer's markets, the business also boasts a CSA. Because of the winter crops grown at the farm, the CSA does not end in early November like many CSAs in the region. It extends until just prior to Christmas.

"We started off with around 16 members the first year and picked up more every year," said Jim. "There came a point when we didn't want to take on more members though because we don't want to have a large farm crew just to manage the CSA."

In November of last year, the company acquired a high tunnel in an attempt to further extend its growing capabilities. The goal is to grow up to March in the greenhouse and then shift to outdoor growing for the remainder of the year. This, said Jim, would truly mean year round growing for Jim's Produce.

So far, the high tunnel has been used to produce lettuce, chard, radishes, turnips, carrots, arugula and spinach. Once those crops were harvested, cucumbers, tomatoes, and ginger were planted, enabling the farm to begin selling these items well before any other farmers in the area.

This type of coordination has allowed the farm to keep ahead of the curve while still keeping labor force low. Moving forward, Jim hopes to become even more efficient with planting and harvesting. He also plans to sell to more restaurants so he can keep winter sales the same all year round without having to tend to farmer's markets as often when the weather turns cold.

Customers Meredith and Soren stopped by the Farmer's Market stand and visited with Amanda from Jim's Produce.

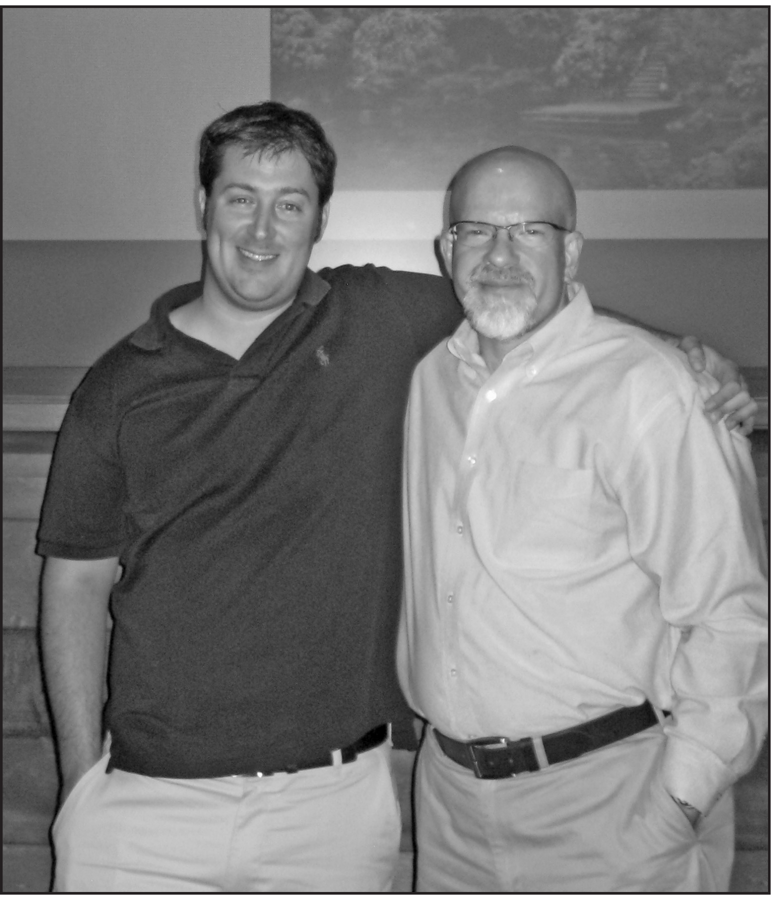
Photo courtesy of Jim's Produce

Future of demand for traditional Green Industry and Agriculture

by Sanne Kure-Jensen

While the U.S. economy declined in the last five years, growth in the Horticulture Industry led all other "Green Industry" sectors. In the past couple of years, the other sectors (Landscaping, Agriculture, Turf, etc.) have caught up as the Horticulture segment matured.

Dr. Charlie Hall, of Texas A & M University, said the Green Industry is "doing more with fewer people." There are fewer businesses, each with fewer employees.



Dr. Tom Sproul, Assistant Professor of Environmental and Natural Resource Economics at URI, and Dr. Charlie Hall, Horticultural Professor and Ellison Endowed Chair in International Floriculture at Texas A & M University, speaking on Green Industry Trends and Economic Impacts at a RI Nursery & Landscape Association Twilight Meeting hosted by URI.

Photos by Sanne Kure-Jensen

Economic Trends

In basic economic terms, demand in the Green Industry has declined. Supplies were too plentiful. Today we face hyper-competition and cost-centric consumers.

To survive, most businesses have reduced their cost of doing business. Since most Green Industry businesses spend an average of 25 percent of their income on production and 40 to 50 percent on labor and distribution, these are the areas to streamline. Be sure to price labor right and pay attention to water use. Dr. Hall advised business leaders to monitor water use, community watering regulations and customers' opportunities for new and existing plantings.

Housing Trends

There have been eleven recessions or depressions since 1948. Dr. Hall advised businesses to position themselves to resist the next one(s).

Housing starts are expected to grow at 1 to 2 percent over the next few years as existing inventory is sold and the number of foreclosures declines. The McMansion Era is over; new homes will be smaller, greener and more efficient than ever before.

Many people think of landscaping and outdoor plants as a luxury to skimp on in tight times. We need to convert fine landscaping into a necessity.

Recommended Marketing - sell Quality of Life

Dr. Hall recommended, "Tell your story!" Our industry has been reluctant to extol the many benefits our products and services provide to customers. Using basic economic terms, we need to increase the perceived value of our goods and services above the price. Dr. Hall said, "Stop selling on price alone; offer a good value and a valuable service."

To become recession-proof, teach customers, "we enhance peoples' lives!" We provide vital benefits to customers' health and well-being. Remind homeowners that landscaping is the only home improvement that yields a positive investment; you can earn back more than a dollar for every dollar spent on improvements. Home values grow up to four times customer's investments in colorful shrubs, perennials and annuals.

Remind customers that we provide vital benefits to their health and well-being. "We sell Oxygen Generators and ecosystem services," said Dr. Hall. Studies have shown that children learn better, productivity improves and sick people recover faster when they see plants or the natural environment. This can be as simple as a vase of cut flowers, window views of trees, a lovely garden or even photographs of outdoor scenes.

Retailing

Dr. Hall defines the three-legged stool of retail selling as value, authenticity and relevancy. Offer customers great shopping experience and real benefits, and you will keep them happy and coming back for more.

Respond to demographic trends, offer more indoor products such as green walls, hydroponic systems and edible houseplants.

Demographics

Market sizes are changing. As aging Seniors die or move to assisted living centers, those who need outdoor plants and landscaping services decreases. The first Baby Boomers are turning 65 this year and many are planning to be 100, fit and active, so they may not need as many services as other age cohorts. Many want urban living with walkable communities.

The 45 to 55 cohort is earning the most and spending the most; many are underwater with their mortgages. They also pay the largest taxes, therefore, they have the least left over for landscape products and services.

The Generation Y cohort is under 25 years old. They are the best-educated and greenest generation yet, according to Professors Hall and Sproul. These students saw all the foreclosures and underwater mortgages and have over $1 trillion in college debts, so they are in no hurry for home ownership. Dr. Hall said the Gen Ys often show "herding behavior" and are likely to rent multi-units housing for many years.

In the next decade, an estimated $7 trillion will transition between generations. The government will get as much as half of this money, but the beneficiaries (mostly Boomers) will have disposable income for Green Industry products and services. Be ready! Make your message all about a comfortable, healthy Lifestyle and Outdoor Living.

Significant Economic Impact

Dr. Tom Sproul of URI participated in a multiyear study to measure the impact of the Green Industry in RI. Included were all aspects of Agriculture, Horticulture, Landscaping, Floriculture, Golf, etc. Not included in this study were forestry and wood products, seafood, fishing, aquaculture and natural resources including eco-tourism.

The Green Industry has traditionally been vastly undercounted. For example, the team found that RI has four times the number of florist businesses that the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported. Few people knew that Rhode Island golf courses and country clubs generated over $140 million per year in direct revenues.

Rhode Island is a small state with high value, highly diversified agriculture that varies considerably across its five counties. RI has unusually many farmers who produce on small farms and offer value-added products. Also unusual is the high number of RI farmers who sell wholesale capturing extra income rather than working with distributors. Many Rhode Island farmers welcome customers for on-farm agritourism experiences, farm stands or CSA pickups.

Being conservative with every figure extrapolated to the State level, the Green Industry accounts for nearly 4 percent of the state's annual economy.

Sproul and his team found 2,570 Green Industry businesses generated over $1 billion in annual direct sales with another $760 million indirect impact, for a total economic impact of $1.78 billion. The largest sector was Landscape firms accounting for about one third or over $600 million in total economic impact. This next largest sector includes retail lawn and garden centers, florists, outdoor power equipment, plant brokers and landscape suppliers (paving, mulch, seed, etc.) with an impact over $500 million. The agriculture sector including food, fiber and fuel crop growers, dairy farmers, cut flower and sod growers and wholesale nurseries had a net impact of $268 million.

Over 8,700 people are employed in RI's Green Industry jobs including farms, nurseries, landscaping firms, retail garden centers, florists, golf courses and related equipment and service suppliers. The largest sector is landscaping firms with over 3,000 arborists, parks and recreation staff, lawn and landscaping service providers, landscape architects and designers as well as masonry contractors. The agriculture sector, as defined above, employs almost 1,800 people.

Dr. Hall described the benefits of industry sectors working together with powerful voices and the clout that realistic impact numbers provide when regulations or water restrictions are threatened. Mike Sullivan of URI agreed, "Use these Economic Impact Study results; make noise and be heard. Help reduce our industry's regulations to a manageable level. Help maintain and expand University's Sustainable Agriculture and Horticulture departments to turn out the next generation of talented farmers, growers, landscapers, turf and flower experts."

Shannon Brawley, Executive Director of the RI Nursery & Landscape Association, noted. "Unusual partnerships will yield powerful results; we are all responsible for our industry and our environment."

Opportunities

Both Dr. Hall and Dr. Sproul recommended advising children and students to go into Agriculture and Green Industry fields. Things will pick up. Today just 23 large producers supply big box stores with plants; they cannot keep up with orders so most use subcontractors. "There are so many exciting opportunities ahead," said Dr. Hall.

Young people are excited about growing food and working in all sectors of Green Industries. Our industry needs to develop businesses independent of new construction and development at the expense of open spaces. All of us will benefit from our beautiful outdoors, both managed and natural open spaces.

For more information, contact Dr. Hall via email at charliehall@tamu.edu or call 979-458-3277.

Contact Dr. Sproul at email sproul@mail.uri.edu or call 401-874-9196.

USDA awards coalition of Northwest cut-flower producers $138,000 in specialty crop block grant funding

SEATTLE, WA — On Oct. 1, 2012, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced $101 million in grants to support America's specialty crops producers, including $138,000 awarded to the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market, a farm-to-florist cooperative of flower growers in Washington, Oregon and Alaska.

The goal of USDA's 2012 Specialty Crop Block Grant Program is to promote and increase opportunities for specialty crops producers and to stimulate agriculturally-based community economic development.

Administered in partnership with the Washington State Department of Agriculture and the Oregon Department of Agriculture, the multi-state grant will fund several new SWGMC programs. A major initiative will train key industry stakeholders in methods for achieving high quality cut flower production with emphasis on season extension, marketing techniques and sustainable growing practices. Funding will also assist the cooperative in providing Washington and Oregon floricultural producers with reliable volume sales opportunities to Puget Sound area supermarkets and chain stores, aiding the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market Cooperative in building a self-sustaining marketing program for large scale buyers.

According to SWGMC President Diane Szukovathy, the Federal and State support provides critical resources to expand and improve the domestic cut flower industry in the Pacific Northwest.

"Washington is the second-largest cut-flower growing state in the nation and Oregon is the fourth-largest," she said. "In February 2011, the independent flower producers and small family flower farms of the Pacific Northwest created a central marketplace for the floral community, strategically located in the heart of Seattle's Georgetown neighborhood. We provide wholesale customers with regular access to high quality, locally grown cut flowers. The farmers have self-funded the cooperative to date, without government support. Now, the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program grants will provide much-needed seed money to help improve our distribution and marketing efficiencies and meet the growing demand for locally and sustainably-grown floral products."

Rianne Perry, WSDA's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program administrator, noted: "This project supports Northwest flower growers' sustainability and provides consumers with opportunities to buy local, high quality cut flowers. We are pleased to include this as one of the 25 projects we were able to fund to support Washington's diverse agriculture, including floriculture."

About the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market

Overview

Washington is the second largest cut flower growing state in the nation. From 1998 - 2009, cut flower producers increased from 52 to 88 and bulb growers from 15 to 56, according to the USDA Floriculture Crop Survey. Critical to the ongoing success of the cut flower growers is the creation of a central market for the floral community in the Puget Sound region. The central location provides customers with regular availability to locally grown cut flowers. Plus growers gain distribution efficiencies by combining delivery of plant material to shared customers.

In February 2011, growers from Washington, Oregon and Alaska formed the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market Cooperative. Shortly after forming the co-op, the Georgetown space was leased to house the market year around. The grand opening of the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market was May 18, 2011.

Market Profile

Founded: February, 2011

Grower Members: 18 (10 from Washington, 6 from Oregon and 2 from Alaska)

Customer Profile: retail and studio florists, event planners, restaurants, and grocery stores.

The market is open to the public from 10-2 on Fridays only.

Photo courtesy of Jim's Produce

Farmer Jim Muck holds recently harvested produce.

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California agriculture leads the nation in funding for specialty crops

State receives more than $18 million in federal grant funds

SACRAMENTO, CA — The United States Department of Agriculture announced funding for the 2012 Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP). California received more than $18 million out of the total $55 million awarded nationwide.

The SCBGP provides grants to states to enhance the competitiveness of Specialty Crops, which are defined as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops (including floriculture).

Research, marketing and nutrition proposals were solicited and selected through a competitive process. The 68 projects funded under the 2012 SCBGP reflect the diversity of California's specialty crops across the state. This year they include, but are not limited to: the development of a quick drying method that reduces energy usage for almonds and pistachios while improving product quality and safety; customized training and counseling on trade and export needs to assist industry stakeholders; offering low-income families access to fruits and vegetables at Certified Farmers' Markets through weight management and diabetes clinics; researching strategies for efficient nitrogen management; and researching management strategies to mitigate diseases affecting the citrus industry.

In addition, CDFA partnered with the Center for Produce Safety in the evaluation and recommendation of food safety-related projects. These projects represent an ongoing effort to minimize outbreaks by proactive research.

"California agriculture is known for its innovators," said California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross. "We have identified projects that will take advantage of this tremendous opportunity for our researchers, educators and others in our agricultural community to improve the prospects of California's specialty crop farmers. This block grant program is a wise investment in making our crops safer, more competitive and more accessible."

Project abstracts are available online at www.cdfa.ca/grants.