

Eads Landscaping and Garden Center shapes its strategy to the market

Foundation set for a flourishing future

by Karl H. Kazaks

There are many similarities between how a business forms and how a plant develops.

Background and experience, like roots, ground an operation and help bring it to the light of day. Key management figures — like a stalk or trunk — support and help structure an entity's functions. Day-to-day business — leaves and flowers — provide the final interface with the world, making the package whole and bringing back inward all that is needed to survive (sunlight, pollination, profitability, satisfaction).

Eads Landscaping and Garden Center, which serves customers in western Kentucky and southern Illinois within about a 70 mile radius of its home in Paducah, has a morphology as logical and impressive as those of the plants in its greenhouse and of the shrubs and trees it has installed for numerous satisfied customers.

The business, brainchild of founder, owner, and president Keith Eads, is both a retail garden center and a landscape design and installation service. But it started from more humble roots, as a yard maintenance company.

Eads started in business for himself after school. He already had experience doing maintenance for a friend and had absorbed knowledge about plants and horticulture from the nursery located next to his childhood home.

Like a burgeoning plant, Eads quickly decided to branch out and learn landscape design. After a period of study, he began landscaping.

Another development quickly followed: the installation of several greenhouses, which Eads uses to grow his own annuals. With inventory on hand to supply his

company's landscaping needs, Eads thought, "Might as well sell retail."

That retail business blossomed. Three years after opening to the public, Eads moved his garden center from its initial spot at his landscape and operations center to a better retail location.

In the earlier years of the last decade, the nursery was the biggest part of Eads's operation.

During the housing boom, landscaping grew to become the biggest part of his business.

After the housing slump, retail sales plummeted and the landscaping carried the business. Eads had to lay off about 10 employees.

Eads's nursery is positioned at the high-end of the market. It sells a full array of trees, shrubs, annuals, perennials, and hard goods. He has four cold frames for potted green shrubs and four growing houses where he grows all of his own annuals and baskets.

At the peak of the housing boom, Eads was selling many flats to retail customers, reflecting the Do-It-Yourself craze of the time. Today, most of his retail sales of annuals are for baskets and potted plants. Likewise, most of his sales of trees and shrubs are to customers who choose Eads to install them.

When it comes to maintenance, Eads has left behind the clip-and-go model of his youth, and now offers full contract services — pruning, weeding, and insect and disease control to go along with basic lawn services.

The company provides landscape designs and installation to both commercial and residential customers, and has one full-time and two part-time (including Eads) landscape planners.

Last year Eads installed 2500 flats of

annuals for his landscape customers — a mix of commercial (industrial and university) and residential customers.

The company also designs, builds, and maintains irrigation systems. Much of that work is repair work. For example, during a drought people might notice one section of their irrigation system is broken or underperforming. Eads will fix that. They also do a lot of the irrigation work for landscape customers who don't want to deal with multiple contractors.

"We're a one-stop shop," Eads said. "There's a market for people who want to deal with just one company."

The retail center has really helped increase the landscaping side of the business. "We've had so many people say they never knew we did that kind of work," Eads said.

The retail store not only brings in landscaping business, but also gives real-life, vibrant examples of the types of plants customers can choose for their landscapes. "It helps people with come up with ideas," Eads said.

Sometimes customers come up with ideas that won't work in their particular setting (i.e., there's not enough exposure to sunlight). "It's hard to tell someone they can't have what they want," Eads said. "But we really focus on communication," to get the point across gently, always offering other options.

One idea customers sometimes have about landscaping, which Eads works to correct, is the notion that landscaping is either high-dollar or high-maintenance. He tells them, "We can design something to fit your needs with plants that will work in your area."

To that end, Eads is in the process of creating package landscaping, most likely in three tiers.

The first starter package will be aimed at younger homeowners or those with less interest in landscaping, and probably be priced at just under one thousand dollars. The middle tier will use more mature plants, to give a more established look and feel, and be somewhere in the low- to mid-two thousand dollar range. The top level will include more hardscaping such as decorative rocks, possibly a fountain or water feature, and come in around forty-five hundred. Eads will continue to offer custom landscape services as well.

This year, Eads's business will celebrate 20 years of operation. He attributes his success to re-investing in his company.

One change underway this year is the move of his design and operations headquarters from its current site a mile away to mobile units adjacent to the retail garden store.

The move will save money and keep the business more organized and cohesive. "When the designers are at the nursery," Eads said, "it never fails that we make a sale." Now with the designers always on-site, they'll be a resource for interested retail customers — and hopefully boost sales in both the nursery and landscape side of the business.

The only regret Eads has is that he didn't make the move sooner. With the economic downturn, he said, "We've kind of been in survival mode for a few years. I wish I hadn't done that so much. I had always been so wide open." Instead, he wishes he had used the leaner year to prepare for the recovery by integrating his two locations earlier.

"Our survival," Eads added, "comes

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Eads' retail store not only brings in landscaping business, but also gives real-life, vibrant examples of the types of plants customers can choose for their landscapes.

Photos courtesy of Eads Landscaping



Founder, owner, and president Keith Eads.



Michelle Becerra, Eads Landscaping.

Expanded food safety rules emphasized at OPGMA convention

by William McNutt

Over 100 industry exhibitors at the annual convention and trade show of Ohio Produce Growers and Marketers Association demonstrated their wares to 800 Ohio produce growers during their mid January gathering. Ohio growers, plus many from nearby states, observed the latest product innovations, services and equipment, while attending the three day event. Forty educational sessions, plus 10 food safety related meetings, were offered to fruit and vegetable growers and marketers. Several sessions on merchandising were offered including one from the show floor stressing the basics of selling.

A top priority at this year's Congress was on food safety and the produce growers responsibility in meeting increasingly rigorous standards promulgated by Food and Drug Administration and the Food Safety Modernization Act. Proposed product safety rules to implement this act have been published by FDA, focusing on standards for growing, harvesting, holding and packaging produce.

Ohio has already passed legislation prepared by OPGMA and introduced by Ohio Farm Bureau, which will allow Ohio Department of Agriculture to put such regulations into effect when 200 Ohio growers sign the enabling petition, according to Karl Kolb of High Sierra Group, who is contracted with OPGMA to develop the Ohio Produce Marketing Agreement (OPMA) then implement management structure as OPMA goes into effect. This agreement came

about when Ohio producers became concerned that regulations already in effect in larger states and then-pending food safety regulations would bring an industry-wide, one type for everybody set of standards.

the current Ohio three-tier program which could be adapted to small, medium and large producers, rather than standard program for all producers, so that features unique to the Midwest could be considered. As one example, Ohio's large Amish population uses horse drawn equipment and smaller scale farming practices that more commercialized growers would not consider, but are still quite capable of meeting FDA standards for Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). The Ohio plan stipulates many of the upcoming FDA requirements, much if not most of which have been in effect for years among progressive growers. Kolb says it protects safety and well being of consumers, which is the primary reason for using GAP. He feels OPGA should make Ohio a leader in food safety agreements, and will help protect farmer reputation.

Ohio growers have until Mid-May to comment on proposed FDA Produce Safety Rule, according to Ashley Kuhlnek, former GAP coordinator for OSU, now extension educator for Medina County. After finalization, it will go into effect within 60 days, a shorter period than usual to require compliance. Produce Safety Rule publication in the Federal Register will put into effect the Food Safety Modernization Act passed in 2011. At the same time a proposed rule for

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Preventive Controls for Human Food was issued, directed at facilities that process, package or store food. The proposed Product Safety Rule focuses on standards for growing, harvesting, packing and holding produce of farms. Especially of interest to direct marketers producing fruits and vegetables intended to be eaten fresh and locally, this could bring inspection more quickly to this type of marketing. Ms. Kuhlnek said



OPGMA Board of Directors. Front row: Laurie Grobe, Kerry Sullivan, Lisa Schacht, and Julie Witten. Back row: Ken Holthouse, Aaron Buurma, Mike Hirsch, Roger Maurer, and Mark Stokes.

Photo courtesy of OPGMA

exemptions for smaller acreage growers were included, as was promised by FDA, as is also the case with the OPM agreement, where Tier 1 producers are given less regulation. The proposed rules also allow states to request variances due to local area growing conditions. She said OSU's horticultural and crop science department should begin research soon to determine additional GAP necessary if alternatives to current practices are needed.

Three-hour GAP workshops have been held throughout Ohio for five years to assist Ohio growers in producing safe produce and will continue on an as needed basis. Kuhlnek, who remains an instructor of GAP and is Ohio's representative to the national Produce Safety Alliance, feels the newly proposed rules on water used for produce may be a big challenge for growers, particularly for those who irrigate. She said this can be a problem, since water quality from streams, ponds, reservoirs, or other open sources can change daily — and be easily contaminated, especially if animals or other wildlife are present. FDA will not require fencing, habitat destruction of animals, or allow animals to be harmed in order to control them.

At the conference's close,

OPGMA members elected four industry professionals to their board of directors: Mike Hirsch, Hirsch Fruit Farm, Chillicothe; Kerry Sullivan, Jacquemin Farms Plain City; and Julie Witten, Witten Farm Market and Greenhouses, all for three year terms. Mark Stokes, Dale Stokes Raspberry Farm in Wilmington, will serve a one year term. Hirsch was elected from the board to serve as President in 2013 (following the custom of

electing fruit and vegetable growers in alternating years). Ken Holthouse of Doug Walcher Farms, North Fairfield will be vice president, with Kerry Sullivan elected as Secretary-Treasurer. Lisa Schacht, Canal Winchester produce grower and farm market operator from Canal Winchester, retiring president of OPGMA, expressed her appreciation for the outstanding service of fellow 2012 board members.

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from not having all of our eggs in one basket. It seems like every time something is down, something is else is up." He hopes that with the current housing market recovery there will be an uptick in demand for refurbished landscaping.

Aside from market conditions, the biggest challenge Eads has dealt with in recent years is maintaining a quality workforce. Since his area of the country has a solid union presence, it can be hard to pay union-scale wages and be profitable.

"One of our key turning points," he said, "was concentrating on narrowing our customer base," minimizing the maintenance work and keeping those customers willing to pay for good quality service. That allowed him to retain his best employees and pay them more, thus keeping them motivated to continue to give good quality service.

"We're not making more profit at that rate," Eads said, "but we have more sanity."

Not only that, but with a solid foundation of good employees, good customers, and 20 years of experience, Eads has the pieces for a long and health future — just like a well-cared-for plant or landscape.

Allisonville Nursery

by Kelly Gates

As a young adult, Jeff Gatewood was searching for a profession that would cater to his interest in the great outdoors. So when his father mentioned a vacant lot the family owned on Allisonville Road in Fishers, IN, the duo determined that the land could be used to sell trees.

"At first, we started selling evergreens that we purchased from Michigan, spruces mostly," Gatewood told Country Folks Grower. "There was a building on the property that my family was leasing at the time, but when our business really picked up, we decided to set up office in that

space and worked out of there for many years."

According to Gatewood, while he began Allisonville Nursery, selling evergreens exclusively, he quickly ventured into selling shrubs. Then, he added other types of trees to the mix too.

He started attending trade shows and taught himself the ins and outs of the plant retail business.

In 1985, after expanding the company to capacity at the original site, the owner made the decision to move to a bigger place.

"That's when we moved onto the five acre property where we still are today," said Gatewood. "That gave us room to

spread out and evolve as consumers demanded different products."

Part of the expansion entailed bringing in a wide range of other plant material, including annuals, perennials, hanging baskets, containers and other related items. The subsequent expansions however, were not what Gatewood would have ever expected when he first founded Allisonville Nursery.

Home décor is one of the most popular divisions at the company now. Along with a handful of garden and landscape decorations, the business sells an "unexplainable number" of toss pillows, jewelry and even fine art.

"The local clientele is the reason we have these things," noted Gatewood. "This is somewhat of an upscale area and our core customer is female and over the age of 40. We select our inventory and even design our marketing campaigns based on who shops here and what they typically buy."

In the early years, Gatewood managed the marketing tasks for the company personally. But, as time passed, he opted to hire a marketing manager who now does everything from planning events and advertising through various mediums to creating in-store signage and handling the nursery's social media outreach program.

Facebook, Twitter and an interactive web site are used to alert customers of new products, events and other happenings at the nursery. Direct emails are also sent out, often including special coupons for those on the mailing list.

"We used to do radio and some upscale magazines as our main marketing efforts, but our biggest media focus at this time is local cable television, during the Christmas season in particular," said Gatewood. "The cable company provides production services for us as part of our fee for commercials. Since the items we sell are so visually appealing — especially our home décor — nothing captures the essence of our business like a t.v. commercial."

Visual interest is also important at the nursery, he added. Allisonville Nursery's staff created vignettes throughout the entire store that showcase individual plants or products. Often, plants and flowers that look attractive together are displayed in these vignettes to help customers choose an array of items for their landscapes.

The company will be doing something similar with its shade and evergreen trees soon.

"We will be displaying our trees in an arboretum type setting with one of each tree together with all other similar trees in a grouping so customers can see them all at once," said Gatewood. "Instead of having large graphic signage attached to every tree



The Gatewoods at Easter. Photo courtesy of Allisonville Nursery

we sell, we will have a single, high quality graphic photo with extensive details about each tree in this display. Then, when a customer chooses a variety, we can walk them out to our inventory and select from that stock."

By congregating shade trees, conifers, ornamentals and other types together, sales associates will be able to help customers quickly identify their trees of choice. Otherwise, they would have to wander up and down rows of trees, trying to determine which attributes they prefer without seeing all trees at the same time.

The vignettes, display gardens and overall attention to aesthetic detail has created an environment ripe for activities that run the gamut from high school reunions to HGTV host appearances.

"I was out in the garden one evening after we closed and recognized how peaceful and beautiful it is at that time of day, so we started opening up to group events, like the high school class reunion that was held here last summer," explained Gatewood. "We also have events in May and June for customers, including one last year with Jamie Durie from HGTV who was going around to garden centers in partnership with Monrovia and speaking to consumers all over the country. We had 200 people show up and for an entry free of \$40 per person. We were able to offset our entire costs of having Jamie here in person."

Each attendee received a copy of Durie's new book and Allisonville Nursery was able to expose the business to many potential customers who had never been to the site before.

It's this unique approach to marketing that has helped the company continue to grow year after year. And, according to Gatewood, he and his team plan to keep creating visually stunning displays, effective promotional campaigns and unique events that keep people coming back well into the future.

Cover photo courtesy of Eads Landscaping
Eads Landscaping, serving customers in western Kentucky and southern Illinois, installs trees and shrubs for numerous satisfied customers.

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