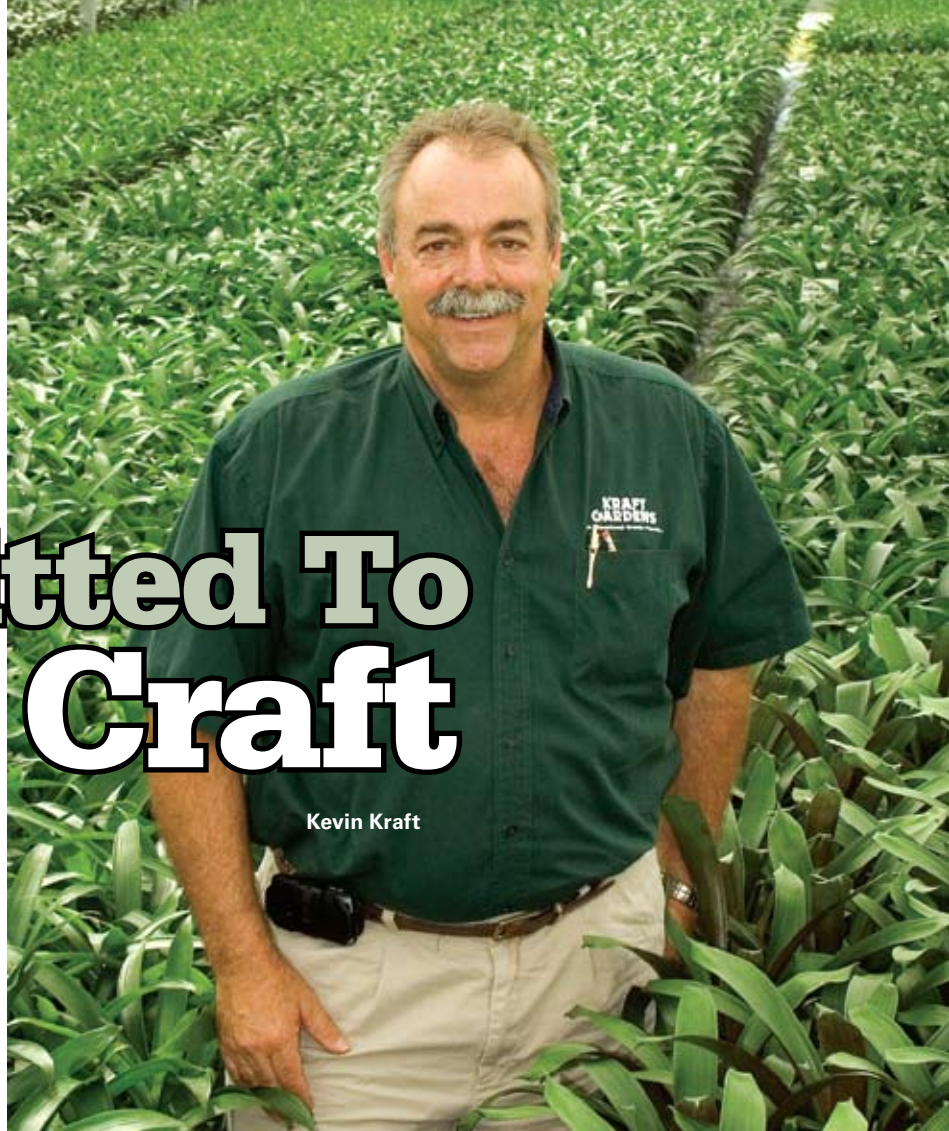




Committed To Their Craft

For Kraft Gardens, Ornamental Outlook's 2008 Operation of the Year winner, success comes from never being satisfied with the status quo.



Kevin Kraft

By Paul Rusnak
Managing Editor

In this day and age of corporate instability, business longevity is becoming a rarity. However, companies that know how to adapt can stand the test of time. Kraft Gardens, this year's *Ornamental Outlook* Operation of the Year winner, has been able to find success by being progressive in its plant-production processes, experimenting with different propagation methods, and not being afraid to try new things.

Kevin Kraft, second-generation owner of Kraft Gardens, says although the operation has come a long way since being founded by Bert and Millie Kraft more than 60 years ago as a lawn and landscape service business, a simple love of plants and a fondness for the people he deals with inspire him every day to do

what he does. "I find it very challenging and rewarding at the same time."

Specializing in indoor tropical foliage, Kraft Gardens has continued to grow and completed a 40-acre expansion project just seven miles down the road



Kraft sees opportunity for quality foliage in independent garden centers and recently added a new line of bromeliads to its mix.

from its headquarters in Ft. Pierce this past February. "You have a lot of growing pains when you have a new operation," Kraft says. "You're spending more money to have more inventory."

Improving Production

Expansion, coupled with trying to produce new product lines in a slow economy, has, indeed, been a challenge. But good planning has helped Kraft Gardens succeed under difficult conditions. In addition to an emergency preparedness program it has in place — which came in handy during the flooding rains produced by Tropical Storm Fay in August — Kraft says the investment in hurricane-strength facilities has paid off. "We may lose some inventory, but not structures," he says. "So, we're able to get back in business quickly."

While planning has been a priority, Kraft says proper execution of these

Photos by Paul Rusnak

Kevin Kraft On ... Growing Your Business

- **Grow your customer base:** "You can do all the innovation, but if you don't have customers that are growing, or you're not adding new customers to your territories, you can't grow. If the market is shrinking, you better take over market share."
- **Stay fresh:** "If you don't innovate and have new products for your customers, eventually your competition will do what you are doing and find a way to do it cheaper."

plans is what makes the difference. "Ideas are just ideas unless you put them on paper," he says. "You have to do everything right."

Part of doing things right has involved working to improve efficiency. Kraft Gardens implemented lean flow a couple years ago to help eliminate any wasted work. "It's not going to help you grow plants any better, but it's going to help with any of the manufacturing processes that you have, whether it's shipping a plant, pulling a plant, unloading, reloading, potting, and producing those manufacturing processes," Kraft says.

It's as easy as taking mathematical equations and applying them to minimize any extra steps in work flow, according to Kraft. The process may be relatively simple to figure out. Getting

buy in from your team and making it work, however, can be a challenge.

"It's not easy to institute because you have a lot of resistance because of what you've done for so long," Kraft says.

Despite having to deal with some of those concerns initially, lean flow has netted positive results and improved productivity. "You have to change because the market changes, and you have to get better, otherwise you get run over," Kraft adds.

Managing Success

Success can be defined in many different ways. Drought, hurricanes, and a struggling economy can alter one's perception of what used to be successful and what actually is today. In a market like this, it still boils down to profitability. Kraft says if customers are buying less and you can't generate enough new accounts, then reduction in purchases and costs is a way to make your revenues match expenses. "You have to watch your cashflow, but you can't be undercapitalized in what you are doing."

For example, he says, marketing budget and selling are elements that should be increasing in times like these. In addition, research and development needs to continue so new products will be waiting in the wings when the market turns around. Kraft works in this capacity with companies like Twyford International and Oglesby Plants International to help bridge the gap between grower and the end customer.

"You can't get discouraged and be scared to try new things," he says. "If you don't have something new to offer, eventually your company gets stale."

Creative Concepts

New just for the sake of being new is not part of the Kraft philosophy. When considering new products, measures



Enhancing staple plants is one way to introduce new products like the Dracaena 'Mass Appeal.'

are taken to look at how they can enhance and improve tried-and-true material and create functions for plants that might never have been thought of. "People are looking for plants they are used to but may have a different shape, a different look, and more excitement," Kraft explains.

For example, the curvy canes of Kraft's Dracaena 'Mass Appeal' bring a new twist on an old plant. "If we can take some of these plants that are staple items and grow them better, faster, and offer them for the same price, then it's a big benefit and takes them above the competition."

In order to help continue bringing these kind of ideas and products to the



Kraft Gardens is constantly testing new plants and growing techniques using ideas learned from contacts around the world.

Kraft Gardens

www.kraftgardens.com

Owner: Kevin Kraft

Location: Ft. Pierce, FL

Year Founded: 1947

Main Crops: Tropical indoor foliage

Size: 80 acres spread over two locations

Number of Employees: 53

Customers: Interior landscape companies, independent garden centers, wholesalers, wholesale florists, brokers, and landscape contractors in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

Company Philosophy: We provide professional grade plants to professional people at the industry's best companies, focusing on product value and customer service.



table, the Global Concepts program was developed. Global Concepts revolves around the idea of implementing valuable plant and propagation information gleaned from sources around the world. Contacts in Central America, Hawaii, and Europe provided great ideas for a variety of things from media options to root development.

The environments that some of these plants thrived in was studied at length. "You cannot make the plant fit the environment, you have to make the environment fit the plant," Kraft says. To help duplicate the ideal atmospheric conditions for the plants, investments were made in Cravo greenhouses with retractable roof systems, aluminized shading material for proper shading, and fogging systems to cool down the plants. "It's a more costly infrastructure, but once we develop the system, we have it and can provide that for the customer," Kraft says. "And we don't have to necessarily haul it all the way from Hawaii."

Down The Road

The evolution in today's independent garden centers has Kraft feeling confident about the future. The creation of destination garden centers along with improvements in catering to the customer has helped those who survived the big-box boom. He sees potential for foliage plants in retail garden centers to be stronger. "A lot of the box stores have shrunken their foliage departments and are going after the cheapest product out there," Kraft says. "So, it opens the door for a quality-oriented foliage plant to the consumer."

Kraft has responded by recently adding a whole new bromeliad line to the mix. "We started growing the Neorge-lia variety and then the next extension of that was the Guzmania," he says. "It hit the ground running."

For More ...

Read more about the 2008 Operation of the Year ceremony, sponsored by Quali-Pro, on page 16.

Using Foliage In The Landscape

Interiorscapers and landscapers working with foliage plants can maintain great spaces and retain client accounts by knowing how to choose the best plants for the job. According to Kevin Kraft, selecting quality plant material that's going to last is a must since costs for not only the plant but also replacing it have to be considered. "If you fit the plant for the environment, it's well-rooted, and suited to where it's supposed to be, in the long term, you can win."

This is the type of versatility that has benefited Kraft Gardens from when it started to today.

"You have to keep re-inventing yourself to fit in the marketplace, and that's what we've been doing." ■