

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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White's to Close Their Wholesale Operation

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They say that all good things must come to an end and that's how we choose to view this news item: White's Nursery & Greenhouse—founded by one of the most venerated individuals in floriculture, Norm White, and run today by Norm and his daughter, Dana, and son, Tal—is closing. Why? The same story we've been hearing from other growers: a capital- and labor-intensive industry, reduced customer demand, rising interest rates and a lender who no longer wants to be involved in agriculture, said Tal White.

Tal said in a phone interview, "Low demand in 2023 led to the most challenging year we've had—more challenging, honestly, than what we had during COVID."

And to top it off, their lender decided not to continue their line of credit, so they had to make the tough call that, after 68 years, they'll close the wholesale side of the business. Their last wholesale crops will be some pansies, Easter crops and spring annuals.

The good news is that they do intend to continue to operate their retail garden center, White's Old Mill Garden Center, along with an internet fulfillment service.

Also good news: With 56 acres of prime Chesapeake, Virginia, land attracting developers from across the country, they should have no problem raising the funds to pay off any debts and move forward.

How can a loss of financing happen to such an established and respected business?

"You're only as good as your last year" in the eyes of a lender looking to renew a line of credit, Tal answered. He added that they'd reached out to potential partners, but he said their business model—club-format stores and grocery chains—doesn't seem to be as enticing as the big box/DIY stores.

"I just don't feel we're as attractive a company to partner with simply because we're not dealing with Home Depot, Lowe's and Walmart," he said.

Once 100% weekly potted plants, especially the potted mums for which Norm became famous, White's had been evolving their product mix over the last 20 years to meet the changing market. In 2000, they were 50/50 potted flowering plants and annuals; today, they're "an annual grower that happens to do some potted flowering," said Tal. "But the potted flowering isn't sustainable. The demand isn't there and the market isn't there."

"We've been constantly moving into new market channels for the last 20 years to match where we could find the most sales, but you've got to fill the greenhouses up to make money. And if you fill them up and don't sell it all, you

lose money.”

Tal added that sales were looking good for this season, but then the lender backed out.

We asked Tal how his dad, who started the business with his wife, Hetty, in 1956, was handling the decision.

“Well, you know, it’s his legacy,” Tal answered. “He started the business on his father’s property. It’s a big change. He’s not happy with it, for sure. But we’ve done everything we could to increase market share.”

As for the future, that hinges on what a potential developer wants to do with the property. They’ve had “strong offers,” but working through the details of how a developer wants to use the site, and whether an adjacent retail garden center fits in or not, will take time.

“The goal is to continue on,” Tal said. “We’ve been growing and selling plants forever, but you have to work through the details of what the developer wants.”

With 56 acres of land to sell, there could be enough to start over, even if on a small scale. Would Tal and Dana ever consider buying a piece of land elsewhere, maybe western Virginia, and building a new White’s Nursery?

Tal considered briefly.

“I wouldn’t say it’s out of the realm of possibility,” he said, adding that he and Dana would love the opportunity to continue to run the business. **GT**