

GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

4/1/2024

Home Sweet Greenhouse

Jennifer Zurko



JENNIFER ZURKO

When I bought my first home, the realtor I used then said that buying a home is a very emotional thing. At first, I was like, “What is he even talking about? It’s a house—it’s not like adopting a kid.”

But as we were going through the process of touring houses that looked good on the website and were NOT when you saw them in person, or falling in love with a place and losing it in a bidding war, I started to realize what he meant. He’d been selling and buying houses for years; he’d seen it all. And he was completely right about there being an emotional side to dealing with one of the biggest investments I’d ever made.

I’ve been in dozens and dozens of greenhouses, but have never had the experience of buying or selling one. Oftentimes, when I’m writing a story on a topic that’s a bit out of my wheelhouse, I think of a way to better understand it. In this instance, for a piece on converting or integrating an established greenhouse facility, I wondered if it was similar to buying a house.

Like, do you buy a fixer-upper on the cheaper side because you don’t mind knocking down walls, tearing out floors and installing new plumbing? I am not one of those people. I fall into the category of people who want a house that’s move-in ready. Some new furniture and a new coat of paint is all I want to deal with. Or do you build new? Yeah, you gotta deal with contractors, but you control everything literally from the ground up. Is it kinda like that with a greenhouse?

I asked the folks at Metrolina this when I contacted them for this month’s cover story and Chris Copeland, the COO of Metrolina’s facility in York, South Carolina, said he liked my analogy.

“It’s a really fascinating way to look at it,” he said. “When someone goes to purchase a home, obviously, they have the strategic piece in mind. Location—it’s close to good schools; it’s close to town. But they also look at the house and they ask, ‘Does it have a good foundation? Do I see myself here? And do I see opportunities with it?’ The other piece is obviously the budget. So [buying a greenhouse] is very much like [buying a home].”

And there’s an emotional side to acquiring a greenhouse, too, with regard to the staff. When the company you’re working for is bought by somebody else, your first thought is whether the new plans include you. And for the owners, transitioning the current employees into a new system—and maybe even establishing a new culture—can take time and be a difficult process.

“The key piece that is different is the people side,” Chris told me. “When you buy a new home, the owners move out. But when the people are still part of the process, that’s what makes it a real challenge. They have to be on board with how you want to re-paint the walls, they have to be on board with how you want to re-landscape the yard.”

Over 10 years ago, Metrolina acquired Stacy’s Greenhouses to help up their game in the perennials category and to consolidate their product offering for their customers, and I was curious about what went into the decision to take over an existing operation as a different means for expansion. I also talked to Al Sray from Prospiant to find out when it’s better to just build from scratch.

Speaking of expansion, before you even think about it, you’ll need to figure out if you have the capital to do it. Learn how you can find the right financing.

We have the second installment of using AI in the greenhouse from our resident tech queen Katie Elzer-Peters, this time for growing the plants themselves.

I know you’re in the thick of things right now and there’s no room in your brain to even entertain the idea of expansion or acquisition. But, hopefully, this spring will be the kind of season that allows you to look at those empty greenhouses and wonder if maybe you could use more space ... **GT**