

The Evolution of Willowbend Nursery®

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I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you all for coming and to thank the IPPS for the honor of speaking to you today.

Willowbend Nursery was founded by the Brewster family in 1897. It began on 7 acres of land. During the Great Depression, the nursery filed bankruptcy and was taken over by a bank. Attempts by the bank to sell the nursery to outsiders went unfulfilled and three Brewster brothers were able to purchase the lands back. One of these brothers was Thor Brewster who eventually bought his two brothers out of the business and passed it on to his only son Dave in the early 1970s.

In 2006, Willowbend underwent its second bankruptcy proceeding. The nursery itself, the land, and the key personnel survived the proceedings; however the Brewster family did not. In the Spring of 2007 Angelo Petitti of Petitti Garden Centers purchased Willowbend out of bankruptcy and Ridge Manor out of receivership. Angelo is a very innovative individual. He is extremely passionate about horticulture and has experienced unprecedented success with his garden centers. He is unparalleled with his uniqueness due to integration. By integrating his business from wholesale through retail, Angelo has created an environment in which only the best product is sold to the end retail customer.

I have been with Willowbend for the 34 years. I started with the nursery in 1976 when I rode my bike to work at a 36-acre facility. We now have 400 acres. Willowbend now only sells bare-root deciduous plants. We are the largest tree hydrangea producer in the world and sell it both nationally and internationally. The tree hydrangea is our signature plant.

Willowbend specializes in six different *Hydrangea paniculata* tree hydrangeas. This program takes 5 years from start to finish for the growing season. The 5-year program begins with propagation and continues through planting, critical trimming, training, staking, and harvesting. This program is labor intensive and has become a popular container item with the big-box stores. The box stores participate in a 5-, 7-, and 10-gal tree program.

The tree hydrangea plus all the other bare-root material that Willowbend grows can be potted up in March and April and ready for sales by the end of June all the way through the remainder of the selling season. This enables us to turn our materials quickly because the plants are large enough and dense enough to fill the container. They only need to root out and flush out. With shifting material you need to complete the shifting, re-rooting, and re-flushing several times in order to fill the container taking more time and space and ultimately money.

Willowbend has been making progress with mechanizing in part due to Angelo's leadership. This has led to tremendous savings for us which are passed on to the customer. The tying machine alone saves an extreme amount of labor. By automating the system, the time is cut by at least half the time it takes to manually tie off a plant. The tying machine enables a laborer to basically stay straight up rather than bending, making it easier and less strenuous on his body. This alone increases productivity.

Willowbend also developed its Willotine machine, which creates a cookie cutter product uniformly cutting to size. The manual process was to cut, trim, and pot up

400,000 bare-root plants and send to Ridge Manor for potting which took 20 men, 8–10 h per day, 6–7 days per week for 8–10 weeks. The same quantity of product is produced with the Willotine and three men in 6–8 weeks. Whereas the potting crew under the original manual method had to stop and help the cutting crew catch up to them, the Willowtine keeps the cutting crew ahead and produces a savings of \$100,000 over an 8- to 10-week period.

Due to the development of the Willowtine for shipping to Ridge Manor another development in new plant grading standards. Because this allowed us to put three times the amount of plants in a 24-ft box truck we decided to pass the freight savings on to our customers. An example of this would be a 48- to 60-in. *Cornus sericea* 'Bailey' scheduled to go in a 5-gal took an 8-ft pallet on the truck. After the Willowtine cut it perfectly it now takes a 2-ft pallet. Willowbend is now providing the trimming that you would do at the time of potting yourself. Willowbend will now be offering a 2-gal to 7-gal liner. These heavy shrub liners are put into a 2-, 3-, 5- or 7-gal liner and are finished by the end of June. The inch increments are now obsolete. This method also saves a tremendous amount on shipping. A 48-ft semi-tractor trailer using the old grading method would hold a \$100,000–\$180,000 order. This new method of grading allows Willowbend to ship up to \$300,000 of product in a trailer greatly reducing the shipping costs. It also reduces labor because the plants no longer have to be trimmed upon receipt.

Willowbend has also adjusted the grading methods of all trees. We now grade by stem height not overall height. This ensures that you will purchase a stem of the size that fits your overall requirements.

The staking machine is another Willowbend mechanization improvement. The manual staking process took 30 men 6–8 weeks to complete. The staking machine has reduced this to 9 men performing the same amount of work in 4–6 weeks. The cost of this mechanization process is approximately \$10,000. Willowbend owned a Polybob tractor and implemented an air compressor, four air hoses, and four chisel guns which completed the mechanization process. This cost was made up in 1 week. This process has increased production by reducing the laborer fatigue factor and they now enjoy doing this work because it is fun for them to do. Our crews argue over who gets to participate in this process.

Two other areas of mechanization Willowbend has implemented are the field-cutting machines and our underground drip irrigation. The field cutter is set up to a specified height and is driven through the fields cutting product to the correct cookie cutter height. The manual process took 20–30 men 2–3 weeks and this process has reduced that to 3–5 men for 2–3 weeks. This is another fatigue-relieving application. The second important result is the cookie-cutting effect that the machine achieves. Drip irrigation is 100% underground. The advantages to this system are that it can water in any extreme condition such as wind and heat, water conservation is a huge advantage for the size of your ponds and it puts the water right at the plant root. The only disadvantage to this is watering the herbicide in, but this can be adjusted for by altering the herbicide program which will offset the disadvantage.

Our goal at Willowbend is to provide the highest quality tree or shrub liner that we can give you at the lowest cost because we consider you our partners in business. This creates a win-win situation for both parties which is Angelo's philosophy in business.