



Customer Spotlight: Dickman Farms ***The Growth of Generations***

In 1903, Dickman Farms began as a small commercial truck farm selling vegetables in Auburn, New York. Four generations later, brothers Dave and Jim Dickman own and operate the now 450,000 sq. ft. wholesale greenhouse growing and retail garden center operations. What's the secret to staying in business for more than 110 years? According to Jim, keeping a finger on the pulse of the market and making changes over the years to remain relevant, has contributed to their longevity.

“Things have changed a lot from the time my great-grandparents first started out as farmers selling produce from a road-side stand,” Jim commented. It seems each generation had their own impact on growing the business. From 1933 to 1962, while they were still farming, the Dickmans even converted a glass greenhouse into a big band nightclub for “dancing under the stars”, where they became one of the region’s leading entertainment spots!

In the 1970s they expanded, growing vegetables both in the greenhouse and outdoor. In 1979 their supplier relationship began with Ball Horticultural Company, establishing their position in the commercial market as a 100% greenhouse growing operation in the 1980s.

Since then, Dickman Farms has become a major national wholesale growing enterprise, producing more than 10 million young plants, and 8 million finished plants a year. Much of their production comes from Ball’s Rooting Station Network, growing vegetative cuttings of Specialty Garden Annuals and Geraniums and shipping them to commercial customers throughout North America.

In 2000 they ventured into the retail market, and opened a garden center. Since then they have expanded that side of the operation as well. Most recently, they completed a renovation that opens the garden center to 30,000 sq. ft. under cover. “The biggest thing we’ve noticed is that on rainy days, the parking lot is full! People interested in gardening use those bad weather days to shop inside since they can’t plant outdoors,” Jim shared.

Having the retail space onsite offers another useful benefit. According to Jim, the retail side helps keep them grounded on what’s popular, which helps guide their wholesale business. “Our folks in the garden center are very interactive with customers. They see what people are interested in, get a good sense of the trends, and are very involved in determining the plans for the spring plantings on the wholesale side.”

Jim attributes the success of the garden center to their knowledgeable and helpful staff. “You can go anywhere any buy plants,” said Jim. “But you can come here and to talk to our experts. If you have a question, ‘ask me’ is even printed on their shirts.” The garden



center's management has done a lot to keep customers coming back, including "Club Dickman" – a playful twist from the old days – where you can sign up online and get weekly email gardening tips, discounts and invites to special events.

Another contribution to Dickman Farms' long-time success is their business philosophy. Jim explains that he and his brother Dave are directly involved in almost all aspects of the business from office work to sales, to growing plants and shipping products out. "Dave and I have always had a 'hands on' approach to running the operation. We both worked here as kids, went to college and came back to run the family business, so keeping up the tradition is important to us," he explained.

Today, Jim's son Bob is involved in the family business. As greenhouse manager, Bob is active in operating procedures as well as plant production, and has been very engaged in transitioning from synthetic pesticides to using biological inputs. "Bob has great experience using biologicals and we are happy with the strides he is making," commended Jim. Bob is on track to continue the family tradition at Dickman Farms. In 2014, Bob was awarded one of GPN Magazine's "40 Under 40", recognizing young industry professionals who are helping to determine the future of the horticulture industry.

"To be successful, you have to be open to change," Jim stated. That value rings true at Dickman Farms. Now bringing in the fifth generation, more than 110 years later, they continue to watch the market, keep tabs on the trends and make adjustments as needed to remain one of the largest growing operations in the Northeast.