



Dale Deppe has watched his company grow from a small propagation nursery to one of the largest providers of proprietary plant materials in the country.

Spring Meadow Nursery in Grand Haven, Mich., has thrived on one concept: Everyone should have access to, and be able to profit from, superior new plants. Through ideas thought radical at the time, Spring Meadow has helped improve the palette of shrubs available to U.S. consumers. Deppe also initiated a process of releasing new plants that has been followed by others.

For his efforts and his many contributions to the industry, Deppe was named **NMPRO** Nursery Grower of the Year.

"The old scenario of releasing plants had to do with exclusivity. You reduce the supply to raise the costs. The plants are higher priced because they're hard to get hold of," Deppe said. "The Spring Meadow method is to increase the price by driving up demand. It's a completely different way of thinking."

### **Modest beginnings**

After graduating from Michigan State University, Deppe worked as propagation manager at Zelenka Nursery in Grand Haven for 12 years. In 1981, he and his wife Liz began Spring Meadow Nursery.

Liz, who has a business and accounting degree, handled the books for Spring Meadow and worked outside the nursery to support the new business at its onset. Their children Jeremy and Kristin also worked at the nursery.

"We evolved over time," Deppe said. "We were a liner business producing commodity products. The only way to make a sale doing this is to be the low-cost provider, which makes it tough to generate margins.

"We decided to start focusing on new plants, and we became frustrated with the process. We knew that if we were going to do this then we were going to have to do it differently." The standard for the time was for breeders to develop new plants, and for only a few propagators to become licensed to produce them.

"New varieties were exclusive to particular companies, and 99 percent of the industry was left on the outside. Nurseries were using these plants to draw interest to their businesses."

### **Open rights**

Deppe's concept was to create an open-licensing policy. Spring Meadow Nursery would take a new plant and let anyone -- even competitors -- propagate and sell it. The royalties of the plant are split three ways - one-third to the breeder, one-third to Spring Meadow and one-third to a marketing program to promote the plant.

"Open licensing wasn't unheard of, but it was a new concept, and it got us noticed right off the bat," Deppe said. "But some companies were upset with this, and didn't like that we were taking a different approach."

Many of Spring Meadow's new plants are sold through its ColorChoice line of shrubs. These plants are marketed through ads in a number of consumer gardening and trade magazines.

Spring Meadow Nursery also keeps close ties with the Garden Writers Association, a trade group of more than 1,800 lawn-and-garden communicators. The nursery has exhibited at this group's annual meeting for many years.

"We can't run ads in all the large consumer gardening magazines. It's too expensive. We've learned to be creative with our marketing money, and we found that these garden writers are a joy to work with," Deppe said. "They're very appreciative and starving for material."

Spring Meadow provides these journalists with sample plants, articles and photos of new varieties. One of the biggest items in demand from garden writers is quality photography, Deppe said.

"They want photography more than anything," Deppe said. "We established our own arboretum just so we could get better photos. That way you can watch a plant and shoot it on the day that it looks its absolute best."

"You can travel around and get one or two pretty good shots. Mediocre photos are easy. But to get great photos you have to watch the plants every day."

### **Where they come from**

Deppe has always been a plant enthusiast. Many of the new varieties promoted by Spring Meadow come from overseas breeders. "Working with new plants makes it worth coming to work every day. They keep the staff excited. There's always a learning curve with them, which is interesting."

"On a personal level, I enjoy the plant-hunting trips. I enjoy traveling, and Tim Wood [Spring Meadow new product development manager] makes all the arrangements. I'm just along for the ride."

This year, Deppe went on plant-hunting trips to Great Britain in April, Australia in May and Japan in September. In October, he went on a missionary trip to Haiti to help establish modern agriculture in that country.

### **Shrub focus**

Spring Meadow Nursery has maintained a focus on shrubs (primarily flowering varieties) and has avoided branching out into other plant categories such as perennials, trees or roses. The company sells almost exclusively 2 1/4- and 4-inch potted liners.

Most plants are propagated from cuttings taken from 55 acres of stock plants and rooted in a custom 55:35:10 perlite/pine bark/peat plus lime medium. Softwood cuttings are taken March to August, and hardwood cuttings are taken November to January.

"We're pretty unique that we've stuck with our focus," Deppe said. "The lesson we've learned from other successful businesses is that you see their names and you know what they stand for.

"In the propagation business, you have the opportunity every day to grow something different. It's a challenge to maintain that focus. But because we have, people know who we are and what we do."

### **Giving back**

Deppe feels it's important to contribute to the nursery industry, and he has served in many capacities with American Nursery & Landscape Association, International Plant Propagators' Society and the Michigan Nursery & Landscape Association.

He also serves on the board of trustees for the Horticultural Research Institute, the research arm of ANLA. He is funding two endowments with HRI -- one is a \$100,000 new-plant endowment and the other is a scholarship.

"We add to them a little every year. That little bit you put away over the years really turns into something fantastic over time," Deppe said. "Giving \$3,000 or \$5,000 per year doesn't sound like much, but over a 10-year period it becomes significant. That's the way we built our company -- a little at a time."

**- Todd Davis - Editor NMPro**