



Speedling's recent acquisition of Greiling Farms' Georgia facility is just one example of the plug giant's commitment to growing new markets and serving its customers.

Expansion through acquisition is the way Speedling has answered its latest market demand – fall pansies. From left is Barry Ruta, Dr. Berl Thomas, and Bill Powell.

Pumpin' Out Pansies

by **MATT HOPKINS**
Associate Editor

EXPANSION through construction has been the normal route taken for Speedling when addressing a growing market demand. But when the opportunity to purchase Greiling Farms' Blairsville, GA, facility – with its excellent track record in producing high quality pansy plugs – came along last year, detouring from the norm became a natural choice for the colossal company.

"We have had several relationships with Greiling Farms – in some form or another – for the past 30 years and have built a mutual respect for each other," says Speedling President Dr. Berl Thomas, who is based at the company's corporate office in Sun City, FL. "We basically communicated with the Greilings for the better part of last year on what worked for them and what worked for us because we wanted to create a win-win situation for both parties."

So what began in 1968 as a vendor-distributor relationship for Speedling and Greiling Farms culminated in a buyer-seller agreement this past December. With the transaction, Speedling now totals seven locations in four states and more than 3 million square feet of production.

Peaking For Pansies

Blairsville – nestled in Northern Georgia's mountainous region – is presently Speedling's Northern most

Speedling

Owner: WBL Corp., Singapore

President: Dr. Berl Thomas

Founded: 1968

Crops: Plugs

Headquarters: Sun City, FL

Locations: Seven

Size: More than 3 million square feet of production

Market: Sell 100% to growers through horticultural brokers

Business philosophy: "Satisfy customers. Satisfy customers.

Satisfy customers. If we do that, then the growth will take place on its own inertia." – Dr. Berl Thomas

and highest location. This prime area has not only broadened distribution channels into the company's major market areas of the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast, it has been a perfect match for pansy plug production.

"Speedling's Blairsville nursery is a modern facility with a lot of high-tech features and is positioned for strong pansy production," says Thomas.

"The mountains give us the cool, late summer temperatures that facilitate growing pansies, which are basically cold-tolerant crops."

While Speedling has had moderate success with pansies in the fall plug market in the past, it has paled in comparison to the company's titanic share in the spring plug market.

"There seems to be a market impression that a good pansy cannot be grown in Florida and so a lot of people have their reservations about getting product from us here," says Barry Ruta, Speedling's ornamental sales and marketing manager.

"We ran pilot programs for the pansy market out of Florida and California with some mixed results," adds Thomas. "But we needed additional infrastructure to do the proper job in those locations. We have added that infrastructure in Sun City, so we feel confident that it – in addition to the Blairsville location – will greatly assist us in having quality pansy products."

Expansion Philosophy

If new expansion has been successful at Speedling's other sites – the Texas facility is increased methodically every year – then why not build a new operation in Georgia instead of buying Greiling Farms?

"Greiling Farms had a good reputation of producing quality products in Blairsville," says Thomas. "We structured the purchase in a manner that both the buyer and seller agreed to have the operational people continue with the facility. So basically, we wanted to expand rapidly with a trained team."

Leading that experienced crew in Blairsville is Bill Powell, who has been the operations manager for 4 years and feels the change in ownership has occurred without a glitch.

"The transition went very smoothly," he says. "We didn't lose any of the people. The facility itself is in excellent condition and has been very well maintained over the years. So, the in-

frastructure and expertise was in place to allow us to grow and expand our business."

In addition to 40 trained employees, Speedling received a 350,000-square-foot Van Wingerden greenhouse that features rolling benches, an Echo hanging basket system, a Priva environmental control system, and a Metroliner automatic transplanter.

But as much as this acquisition seemed to be a no-brainer, Thomas says expansion – either through new construction or existing facilities – is only considered if it meets Speedling's own strict criteria. "We are not interested in expanding at the sacrifice of quality, customer service, or on-time delivery," he says. "If we can't maintain those standards and increase the business, then we should not do it."

"The first thing we do is put ourselves in the customer's shoes. Does expansion allow us to interact more effectively with our customers or does it allow us to serve our customers in a better way? Ultimately, the customer is the person who is employing us."

Bottom Line Is Customer Service

One of Barry Ruta's main responsibilities as sales and marketing manager of Speedling's ornamental division is to, as he puts it, "keep Speedling in the forefront of plug production in terms of quality and providing the best customer service possible."

To achieve that goal, Speedling spares no expense in making sure each customer is completely satisfied.

"We spend a lot of money making sure that we provide the mechanisms that reduce as much risk as possible in our product as far as our customers

are concerned," says Thomas. "Our customers can't afford a crop failure."

One production investment that has been purely market driven is in the area of plug trays.

"For the past 5 years we've been re-plugging our bedding plant trays to accommodate the growing number of people using automatic transplanters," says Ruta. "We wanted to ensure that there would be no skips when growers use this mechanical equipment with our trays. It's just one example of how we try to be innovative in what we provide to our customers to help them do their job better."

Speedling also relies heavily on feedback to ensure customer service. "Take our 10-week geranium program, for example," explains Thomas. "It was first introduced by Speedling in 1974 and every year we refine that program. We encourage feedback from our customers and take that data to tailor production on a variety by variety basis."

On The Horizon

As Speedling gears up for its first fall pansy season at the Blairsville location, it has an eye on other exciting markets as well. "Perennial plugs were something that we traditionally have had requests for but never had the opportunity to produce them in quantity because of our Florida climate," Ruta says. "The climate at the Georgia location is going to allow us to do seed-propagated perennials this fall."

Another area that Speedling is looking into expanding is its line of cut flower plugs for both the domestic and international markets.

"We have a lot of requests for exporting material into Central and South America," says Ruta. "We're really just getting involved in that this coming fall in any significant numbers."

A regular at the California pack trials every year, Ruta says staying on top of new genetics as they become available is essential in getting a head start on potential new varieties.

"We work very closely with the various seed companies," he says. "We do plug samplings of their new items for them, which gives us some experience in growing these new items and provides our customers a chance to look at things early."

Just another example on how Speedling merges quality with customer service.