



# American Nurseryman

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## New Englanders Grow

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# New England Grown and Perennially Good

*Nearly 20 years ago, the van Berkum family started a small, wholesale perennial nursery with a retail flair in New Hampshire that now serves all of northern New England.*

by Sarah Landicho

**I**n 1987, husband-and-wife team Peter and Leslie van Berkum began growing their little dream, Van Berkum Nursery LLC, in a sandpit outside their Chester, NH, apartment. At the time, Peter was working full-time at a nearby garden center, and Leslie was on a break from her regular jobs as teacher and musician.

With their first child on the way, the couple decided it was time for a change. Peter always had dreamed of making a living by growing something. He once tried his hand at growing vegetables, but it was too hard to turn a profit, he says. However, his experience in ornamental production taught him how to run a nursery. Perennials seemed like the perfect niche, as they were just on the brink of popularity.

The duo figured their previous career paths would serve their growing efforts well: Peter, the plantsman, would figure out which perennials to produce and how to take care of them best, while Leslie would educate customers about the plants, as well as head up marketing.

Although Leslie wanted to open a garden center, Peter pushed for a wholesale operation. Having worked in a retail environment before, he knew how difficult it could be, he explains.

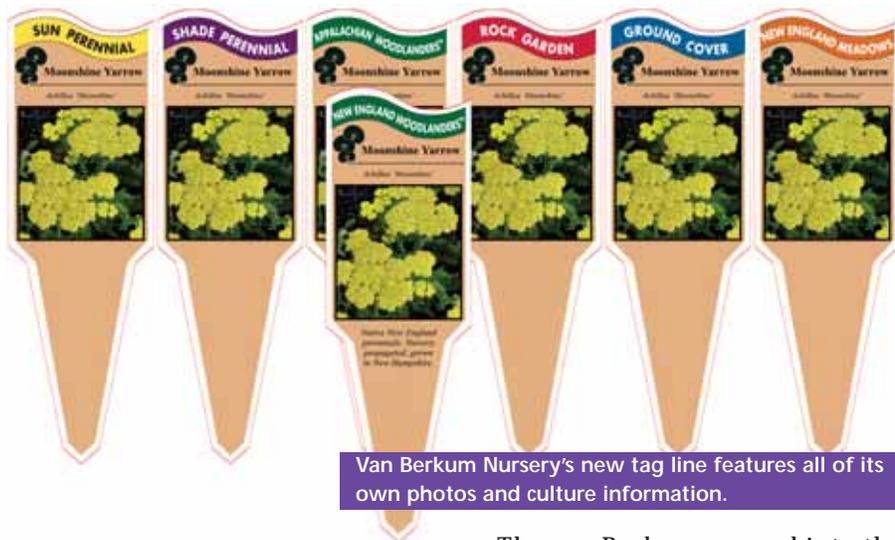
The wholesale idea won, and for the best, adds Leslie in retrospect. "I would have loved to have a retail place myself. It would be an opportunity [to have] fun, I thought," she recalls. "I was probably wrong in thinking that. ... You have to have a lot more patience to have a successful retail business. We're dealing with all green industry professionals, and they're generally a really nice group of people. It's easy to be nice to them and want to help them."

The van Berkums wanted their nursery to be unique. One way they did this was by focusing on a different customer. "We wanted to specialize in the landscape trade," Peter says. "We decided there were already people doing garden centers."

With the planning in place, Van Berkum Nursery was born. Planting began in fall 1987 in a shady, 50- by 200-foot sandpit. The duo rented the plot from their landlords for \$1, as well as promised to plant the landlords' vegetable garden, says Leslie. "We had a great deal. There was a river nearby, and we would just pump water out of the river, and we had this little, shady place to grow our shade perennials," she recalls.



The production crew brings freshly potted plants into the nursery's natural shade.



Van Berkum Nursery's new tag line features all of its own photos and culture information.

**A booming beginning.** By the following spring, the nursery was selling perennials and in need of more land on which to grow. In 1989, Peter found the right spot — a new, much bigger place to expand their business just 30 minutes north in Deerfield, NH. The 22-acre site (which since has grown to 35 acres) borders a state park, and much of it is under the shade of pines.

That summer, they set up the nursery on a small portion of the site, and by fall, they moved in with a little help from friends and customers — and pots of van Berkum chili for fuel. “It was the equivalent of a barn raising,” Peter says. “We had 15 trucks and 30 people, and we moved 30,000 plants in one day.”

The van Berkums moved into the house on the property, and both the family and the nursery were set to grow. In the nearly 20 years since the business started, the family grew to five, and the business swelled far larger.

The nursery gradually expanded to take up approximately 5 acres of the 35-acre site, including an acre of greenhouse, Peter says. Shade plants grow under the natural, dappled cover of pines, while sun plants enjoy the light. Here, the operation produces more than 700 varieties of sun and shade-loving perennials, as well as its trademarked New England Woodlanders® series, featuring native New England shade plants, and its Appalachian Woodlanders® series, highlighting plants native to that region.

“We grow trillium, bloodroot, bunchberry — all kinds of stuff many people have never heard of before, and they're beautiful,” Peter explains.

While these special series only make up approximately 10 percent of nursery sales, they are vital to the operation. “What we find is [Woodlanders® plants] are what gets us in the door. Making it profitable, that's the rough part because some of the stuff takes years to grow,” Peter says.

In addition to adding the Woodlanders® series, the family has extended its perennial selection far beyond its original scope. “We are growing plants that we said we would probably never grow in the beginning. Some are kind of a pain in the neck to take care of, like *Delphinium* and lupines,” Leslie says. “We originally said we only wanted to grow those plants that are easier to maintain, but people said, ‘We just want to come to you for our perennials.’ And people still want to grow them and plant them, so we [started growing them] about eight years ago.”

The nursery also now serves an area far larger than just New Hampshire. It delivers nearly 80 percent of its plants to landscapers — and garden centers — throughout northern New England. “We actually got into the garden center business because they came to us asking for plants,” Peter explains. Retailers have grown to approximately 40 percent of the total business, he adds.

“It's a very safe bet servicing both [sectors]; the hard thing is both have fairly dis-



Van Berkum Nursery has grown to approximately 5 acres on the 35-acre homestead, which also includes an acre of greenhouse space.

tinct needs with color and seasonlong availability,” Peter says. “We have to have most of our things available all the time, so we plant things two, three, four times a season just to keep them fresh.”

Another reason for all this work is to avoid tired plants. “It’s so much easier to grow fresh plants. We spend an awful lot of effort figuring out a planting schedule,” he adds. “The challenge is really timing and figuring out the idiosyncrasies of growing plants in cool and hot seasons.”

**Retail reasoning.** In addition to its high-quality perennials, part of Van Berkum Nursery’s appeal to garden centers could be the fact this wholesale business has a strong retail feel to it. That was a goal from the beginning: to make the nursery user-friendly by applying some educational tools borrowed from garden centers, the van Berkums say.

More than 9,000 square feet of display gardens adorn the nursery, much like what one would find in a retail setting. Not only do these relaxing spaces serve as decorative gardens for the family, they’re home to some stock plants, and they are educational. Plants are labeled for easy identification, and nursery maps tell visitors where they can find the plants for a closer look.

The van Berkums encourage landscape design customers to come and use their space when doing their planning. This year, they’ve even set up a new office, complete with a library, to make them more comfortable.

“We love it when people come here with their picnic lunch — when professionals come and bring a couple of other people and spend half the day,” Peter says. “Only 20 percent of [our customers] come in here at all. And for people who don’t come here often, we want them to have a good impression.”

While the grounds inspire visitors, the



## Nursery notes

One of the ways Van Berkum Nursery stays on top is by staying ahead of the curve, says co-owner Peter van Berkum. “When we first started growing perennials, we thought we were way out on the left, growing wild stuff,” he explains. Then they attended a perennial conference. “We were asked to bring something special that was new and exciting, but they all kind of pooh-pooohed [ours],” he adds. “They presented genera we had never heard of before. We then realized if we did grow stuff on the left, we would go out of business in a week.”

The nursery professional likes to think of his production choices as being on a bell curve, and the nursery’s job is to stay about one-fifth of the way down on the left of the curve, a few steps ahead of the mainstream plants. It’s a job that keeps the staff on the move, as perennials constantly are being absorbed into the norm.

Quality is a No. 1 priority. “We find the plants tend to be healthier in the long run when they are grown ‘leaner and meaner’ [by using less fertilizer and not being force-fed],” says Leslie van Berkum, Peter’s wife and nursery co-owner. Many landscapers and garden centers opt for larger plants of the same age from other growers, but that’s not necessarily a good thing. “Sometimes it takes a while for people to come back and say, ‘Yours really survive better,’ but they do,” she adds.

One way the nursery is running leaner and meaner is by abandoning some of its old propagation practices. While the nursery still produces its New England and Appalachian Woodlanders® series from start to finish, it now buys many cuttings from other sources. “We used to grow all our own seedlings. . . . Now, we stick [tip cuttings] and root them here, but we’re not maintaining the stock,” Peter says. “It used to be a huge expense for us to maintain stock.”

From start to finish, the plants are pampered. Everything is under overhead irrigation, the nursery professional explains. Most watering zones measure 50 by 100 feet or 50 by 60 feet with timers. And the watering schedule is key.

“We have about 100 different watering zones, and we never program them more than a day in advance because we want to see what the weather is like,” Peter adds. “We want to prevent overwatering. It’s kind of the curse of growing plants — more so than underwatering.”

Selecting the right perennials to meet their customers’ needs and excellent attention to plant care are just a part of what makes Van Berkum Nursery a New England success story. But it’s a big part, and one that won’t be compromised for any reason, the family says.



The New England Woodlanders® series helps get Van Berkum Nursery noticed by potential customers. The nursery’s spiral-bound catalog (inset) is a handy size and features all the basic plant information, as well as a useful reference for solving design problems.

van Berkums credit the nursery’s staff and the customer service they provide for bringing clients back for more.

“[Customer service] is something a lot of companies give lip service to, but we have such incredible employees,” Leslie says. “The whole time we interview some-

one, we look to see if they are a team player first, and second, if they’ve worked with plants. . . . People bend over backward here to help [customers]. We even have a driver who brings a customer’s dog a certain kind of sandwich. It’s stuff like that that makes a difference.”



Sometimes customers don't have enough room in their trucks for all the plant material they want from Van Berkum Nursery.

Eight to nine people work for the van Berkums year-round, and during the busy months, the number jumps to nearly 30. Much of the permanent work force has been with them for years, and many of the seasonal employees return each spring.

"The staff is what makes this place happen," Peter says. "Keeping the staff happy is the key to making this place work. ... I wouldn't even do this without continuity of staff."

One of the ways the company keeps employees happy is with regular staff meetings, as well as a few celebrations, to encourage open communication. Whenever something big happens, such as uncovering the nursery each April, it calls for a pizza party or Chinese food.

**Marketing matters.** Of course, part of the nursery's success is due to its marketing program, spearheaded by Leslie. "We did a logo right off to give us some identity," she explains. They also created simple plant tags that have grown into something the nursery professionals are very proud of. "The tags were originally handwritten by me. They were really not very pretty or informative. ... Now, we have all our own photographs on the tags, and they're all printed with the same information that's in our catalog, so everything matches."

In terms of educational value, Van Berkum Nursery's catalog gets high marks among users. It measures a handy 5½ by 8 inches and is spiral-bound for easy use. In addition to in-depth plant



Interesting selections, such as *Tricyrtis formosana* 'Samurai', help keep Van Berkum Nursery ahead of other perennial producers.

descriptions and planting requirements, the last 20 pages contain lists of plants to use in designing or solving particular planting challenges.

"[The catalog] is based on educating our customers and trying to be user-friendly in all ways," Leslie adds. "We had a lot of Joe Landscapers in the beginning, and we had to [provide information] in a way that gave them their dignity. We didn't want to have to say, 'We'll teach you about perennials.'"

This year marked the 12th time Leslie's mother, an accomplished artist, has painted the cover for the catalog. The van Berkums plan to combine the covers into a calendar available for 2007.

Of course, in today's world, marketing efforts need to stretch far beyond tags and catalogs. The nursery also has an enlight-



The nursery really is a family affair. Here, son Jake van Berkum, 15, reads the greenhouse temperature with a little help from dad, Peter.

ening Web site ([www.vanberkumnursery.com](http://www.vanberkumnursery.com)), as well as regular mailings, the *Bud and Bloom Notes* customer newsletter and weekly availability lists. Special signage also is available for garden centers.

Additionally, Van Berkum Nursery plays host to a special event for customers each fall. "We have a really neat open house in the middle of September," Peter explains. "The nursery always looks fresh in September. It's an afternoon into the evening, and we get between 100 and 200 people. We put on a good feed."

While the nursery has changed over the years, in many ways it's still the same.

"We're still committed to seeing what is new out there and by educating ourselves constantly to really grow the best plants — the really healthy plants," Leslie says.

"I feel very strongly that we don't want to lose touch with our roots. We have a good, family feeling here and a close rapport with staff and customers," Peter says. "We want to make sure we don't lose that."

And people have taken notice of the van Berkums and their values. The nursery won the Jeffrey H. Butland Family Owned Business of the Year Award for New Hampshire in 2005. "It was very exciting," Leslie recalls. "Being a family-owned business is what we're trying to be about, and that's kind of the way we'd like to be seen."

Peter and Leslie are pleased with how their nursery has grown from a small sandpit to a successful, well-respected operation. "I think what we're proudest of is the entity itself," Peter adds. "We're proud of our plants. We love the plants, and we're proud of having developed this system that can produce these nice plants — and that we can still have [great] customer service."

As for future plans, the van Berkums intend to continue expanding their perennial offerings and display gardens, while serving their valued customers with their indispensable staff.

*Sarah Landicho is a contributing writer of AMERICAN NURSERYMAN.*

