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He Covers A Lot Of Ground

When Peter Orum First Set His Roots, They Took Well

April 29, 1990 | By William Aldrich.

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Four identical briefcases stand side-by-side in Peter Orum`s office. He explains it is easier to keep paperwork straight for the various commitments that take up the majority of his time.

Orum`s office is in the basement of what was once the family [home](#), just north of St. Charles. ``We built this to be our home and office when we bought the property,`` says Orum, ``but the business has grown so much that we have long since moved out,`` converting the entirety to managing Midwest Groundcovers, one of the 100 largest nurseries in the country and the largest of its type in the Midwest. It serves mostly wholesale accounts but does sell some plants retail.

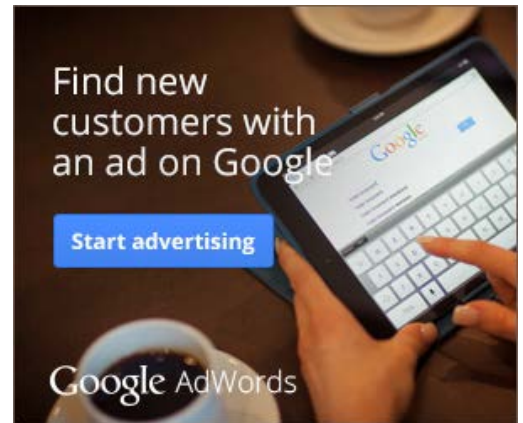
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Orum works out of the basement because he says others need the space more than he does. Wearing work clothes and boots, he apologizes that his normal vehicle, a pickup truck, is in the shop; so the family van is pressed into service for a tour of the 160 acres that comprise the main site and the five acres three miles closer to St. Charles along Illinois Highway 25.

Growing up in a nursery family in his native Denmark, Orum studied horticulture and



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served in the Danish military, where he traveled some, he says, but never farther than Germany. His taste for travel whetted, he decided on seeing America and found a job working for a friend of his father`s at a nursery in Dundee.

Orum became the propagator, the person in charge of cutting off the tips of various kinds of plants and rooting them to create more plants. He married a Chicago native, Irma, and they confronted what they wanted to do with their lives.

``We were packed and ready to go back to Denmark to live,`` Orum recalls, ``but then I looked around and saw opportunity here. I told myself here`s a place where there are not enough plants while at home there were too many plants in people`s gardens. There is so much space here, and it is still that way. There is room here for more plants for the next 100 years or so.``

Peter and Irma decided to strike out on their own, founding their company in 1969 in the back yard of John Wilde, a propagator who lived in West Chicago. ``He let us put in 30 sashes (mini-greenhouses), and we made our original cuttings, 12,000 of them, and that is how we got started,`` Orum says. ``We started with groundcovers, and it is still more than half, maybe two-thirds, of our [business](#)``

At the time, ``there was a market getting going for it and we saw it growing,`` Orum says. ``No one was specializing in it, although there were several nurseries who did some.`` Groundcovers are plants such as ivy, pachysandra and Vinca minor that spread along the ground. They are often used in shady situations where grass is unable to thrive.

The Orums searched for small acreages where they could locate the nursery, finally settling on the five acres north of St. Charles. Each had \$2,000 in [savings](#), which combined made the downpayment on the land. ``Then we had nothing,`` Orum recalls.

``Peter went out selling our products with a trailer and things just started to snowball,`` said Irma Orum. ``It was a lot of hard work on his part, contacting different people. It seemed to spread by word of mouth, we started producing more plants. We didn`t do much advertising because we could sell everything we grew. We could prove by our income statements that we were doing good business, and the [banks](#) helped us along.``

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By 1974, the Orums were ready to expand, but they were not able to buy any land adjacent to their [property](#). They bought 14 acres up the road and continued buying until 1986, when the 160-acre parcel was complete. The site is being developed rapidly, and when further expansion comes along, the Orums have another 160-acre nursery being developed in Fennville, Mich.

The Orums aren`t pushing their children toward the nursery trade, but daughter Christa, 21, has designed a new retail area for the nursery as a project toward her landscape architecture degree, which she will receive next month from the University of Illinois. Their son, Stig, 16, works part time at the garden center of a friend of the Orums.

The original glass sashes that served as cold protection more than 20 years ago still function at the original nursery site, but the area is predominantly hoop houses, low metal frameworks that are covered by white plastic in the winter to protect the potted plants inside. Trees have been left in place to provide a natural setting. The five acres produce 2.5 million rooted cuttings a year that are moved to the larger nursery for maturing. It takes a growing season to produce a saleable plant for most groundcovers, between four and six years for many of the evergreen shrubs.

February 16, 2003

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March 28, 1995

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The key to forcing a snippet of a plant to set out roots is to keep the above-ground portion moist so the plant doesn't dehydrate. All newly propagated plants are misted several times an hour during this crucial period. Orum says if he lost power to pump the water for as little as one hour during a hot day, he would lose more than half his crop, so there is a reservoir to hold emergency water supplies and diesel-powered generators to keep the equipment pumping.

At the newer nursery, the property used to slope toward an adjacent housing development, sending excess water into back yards. Earth movers have changed the contour so the land slopes the opposite direction. Runoff water from rain or sprinkling now is channeled to retention ponds that pump it back uphill to water the crops again.

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The series of three reservoirs, two of which are still being finished, are connected to pumping stations that can draw pond water or water from a creek closer to the Fox River. In drought situations, Fox River water can also be tapped. Fertilizer can be added to the water lines at a flip of a switch, tapping into huge vats of blue-colored water in the pump houses.

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These innovations haven't come about by accident. They are the design of an allied company of Orum's, Midwest GROmaster, which creates watering systems and benches used primarily in commercial greenhouses.

Computer technology is the cornerstone of the firm, figuring how much water and fertilizer to deliver to potted plants or how long a misting system should stay on. Sensors can be installed to measure the solar radiation, evaporation rates of the plants and temperatures, automating a major portion of the growing cycle. Input on how a particular crop grows allows the computer to control even more factors.

The GROmaster braintrust is also serving landscape design firms. Switch computer disks and a landscape designer can show a potential client how a planting scheme would look in color, then print out the plan, a leap beyond the drafting board.

If that weren't enough to keep Orum busy, a third company, Midwest Trading, serves landscapers with tools, mulch and other growing supplies. The company buys spent mushroom compost for use in growing mixes on the nursery and also to bag and sell at garden centers. It is one of the best organic fertilizers around, Orum says. The company also manufactures the hoop greenhouses that have found a big market in Europe.

Orum says he has time to devote to serving the nursery industry because the various companies are well run. He is president of the International Plant Propagators Society, vice president of the Illinois Nurserymen's Association and a board member of the MidAm Horticultural Show, an annual trade conference in Chicago. He also likes to plug the Scandinavian American Cultural Society, which he says he spent years trying to organize and now serves as past president.

"Nursery associations are doing important work. We go to Springfield many times a year," he says. "Nurserymen would be dead without associations. Many legislators propose laws that they don't realize will impact so many people, that cause consequences they hadn't thought of. It's easy to criticize politicians, but people often don't take the time to go in and work with them. They'll listen."

"Peter is one to participate and help in any way he can," said Randy Vogel, executive director of the Illinois Nurserymen's Association in Springfield. "Every year we have an agricultural legislation breakfast, and he always comes and always visits with the legislators. We need people like Peter to explain our industry. He writes letters to state legislators and congressmen, and they are very effective. I would like to have a lot more members who would take the time to do it."

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Jim Fizzell, senior horticulture adviser with the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension, said Orum's European training allows him to bring a refreshing aspect to the business:

"He's an innovator. He thinks in broad terms for the industry as a whole. He is almost visionary in looking for something new.

"The system in Europe where you serve an apprenticeship in the business is technically far advanced to what we have here. The system requires that you work in the business so you not only have the book learning but know the practical side when you go out in the field. When we started a nurserymen apprenticeship program, Peter Orum was the first one on the bandwagon."

Orum also realizes the ecological implications of his industry: "We'd like to feel we have a mission to grow these plants for society and then to take care of them. Most of us feel we have some mission for doing something worthwhile for society and our country."

That doesn't mean everything is rosy. ``People need to show some understanding. They can't come in and say tomorrow change the laws,`` he said, referring to government agency regulations.

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“There is one agency that is doing things in a positive way, the Illinois Department of Agriculture’s Plant Inspection Service,” he said.

“They have to certify nurseries to make sure we meet standards. They are positive people, they push us along to spray the right things at the right time and are getting results. If you spray at the right time, you can cut pesticide use to one-tenth of what it was. [It costs](#) us tens of thousands of dollars a year for pesticides, and we don’t want to do it if we don’t have to.”

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“We are doing a lot for the environment with recycling and other things, but we can do more and we are working on it. Our biggest fear is that people will become unreasonable in government.

“Since the 1930s we have used rooting hormones to start the cuttings and they are very important to us.” Now one of the most important ones is under fire because it caused cancer in rats, using rates that people would never be exposed to in a lifetime, Orum says, much less ingesting it over a short time period. Tests now have to be performed to prove

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the compound`s safety, which cost more [money](#) than the industry can raise.

With that speech, Orum would seem ready to grab one of the briefcases and head off to a meeting of one committee or another. More than likely, however, he`ll be heading back to some portion of the nursery to check on things, calling out, ``Buenos dias,`` as he passes crews of predominantly Mexican workers. ``I realized early on that I could [learn](#) Spanish easier than they could learn English; so I went to school to learn enough to communicate, but I`ve never become proficient in it.``

A conversation minutes later belies his modesty. For a third language, he does very well. But not as well as he has done with his second language, the one that allows him to talk common sense with legislators on issues that affect not only his own [businesses](#) but his entire industry.

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