

## Thinking Outside the Box(wood)

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### Summary

Saunders Brothers is a multi-disciple business including a wholesale nursery, fruit orchard, farm market and garden center. After

a brief history of Saunders Brothers, key aspects of business practices were described.

### INTRODUCTION

Saunders Brothers was started in 1915 by five brothers who believed that a handshake and a verbal contract were binding. Working together, they raised cattle, tobacco, and apples. During the Great Depression they caught and sold rabbits to keep their business afloat.

The business was continued by 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Paul Saunders who had a civil

engineering degree and a surveying business. His 4-H project in 1947 was rooting boxwood. With the help of his science teacher, he turned growing plants into a successful business. He grew boxwood mainly in the field and, in a limited fashion, some in containers. The container nursery expanded tremendously after Hurricane Camille in 1969 as over 30" of rainfall fell

over an 8-hour period. Rich bottomland of field-grown plants were washed away, and his business approach changed. Paul and Tatum had 7 boys to meet the labor needs on his thriving farm.

Starting in 1980, his sons started returning from college. Six of the 7 biological sons returned to work at one point or another in the business. Also, Paul and Tatum took in a “son” from Canada and one from Russia. Four of the boys stayed on to work in the business along with their Canadian brother. The ‘80’s were good for business as Ronald Reagan was President and interest rates were down.

Today, Saunders Brothers produces over 1100 plant varieties on their 100+ acre container nursery. An adjacent 500-acre farm was purchased in 2021. The first company auto vent greenhouses were built in 2023. Sixteen 30’ x 200’ houses were built with the layout for 10 more. These greenhouses will be covered 24/7 for *Buxus* production. The goal is to keep dew and rainfall off the crops thus reducing the possibility of those plants developing Boxwood Blight.

Production at Saunders Brothers includes an extensive line of woody plants, annuals, perennials, and some shade and ornamental trees. The goal is to be a one-stop shop for independent garden centers and landscapers. The company is part of a five nursery LLC called Synrgy; all five share common business philosophies. The LLC shares business ideas and, through breeders, their own plant genetics. The businesses, on a rotating basis, open their operations to the other partners and their employees for a few days of “seeking and sharing”.

Boxwood are the number one item produced at Saunders Brothers and constitute nearly 30% of the corporate sales. Field plants are grown on raised beds to improve drainage. The company owns patents on several cultivars and has its own breeding program and an off-site Boxwood Blight testing site. The NewGen™ line of *Buxus* is the property of Saunders Brothers and currently has licensed 32 growers around the world.

Product is shipped into 13 states which are mainly in the northeast Atlantic area. The product is mainly shipped on rolling carts to improve plant presentation and reduce employee touches. It also makes it easier for independent delivery drivers to deliver the company product. In 2023, the company signed a contract with a Lean Flow company to improve the efficiency of its shipping system.

In addition to the container operation, there are 159 acres of field production. The rolling topography has been a challenge and requires heavier horsepower tractors to accomplish the work. Fruit production includes apples, peaches, Asian pears, and nectarines. Also, the company produces over 50,000 one-year bench-grafted apple trees.

Retail speaking, the company has a Farm Market that is open for 9 months annually and sells their fresh fruit, and plants. Jams, jellies, salsa, beef, pork, and ice cream are also sold through the Farm Market. In the winter months, the company sells Christmas trees and makes high-end wreaths for their customers.

What has it taken for the company to succeed? Certainly, *Buxus* is the crop on

which they hang their hat, notably providing plants to the White House Rose Garden on two occasions.

To keep the business going for future generations, the company hired independent succession planning contractors who have helped steer and structure the growing company. At present, five of the fourth-generation offspring have returned with roles in the company. Saunders Brothers has 66 full-time employees, 13 part-time, and 108 H2A workers.

Job descriptions are the key for an employee to understand his role. The description must be detailed enough for the employee but broad enough so that an employee can assist in other capacities. This is especially true with a company that has seasonal workloads. Training an employee requires a manager to spend the essential amount of time for a worker to understand the expectations for them.

Also, employees must be provided with the right tools for success whether it is a computer, vehicle, or anything else that makes them more efficient. One method of improving efficiency that the farm still utilizes is incentive pay. This type of piece rate work can reduce a job's per unit cost but requires management to set quality standards. Holding onto good workers is done by providing the right company culture, paying them comparable wages, offering good benefits, and treating workers with respect. Challenging workers is also important to make workers reach new levels.

Communication is always important in any relationship and Saunders Brothers believes in the sandwich approach when addressing an issue. Approach the topic with something positive, present the

issue at hand, and wrap up by touching on something positive.

As mentioned before, take time to train a worker. When you feel they are ready to move ahead, give them a longer leash. Not training a worker about basic tasks results in a worker not meeting the owner's satisfaction. Be patient during the training process and understand that employees will make some mistakes and not do some things the way you expected. These small mistakes can turn into teaching opportunities.

Training workers includes letting them go to industry events. Making them accountable includes them writing up a summary of what they learned and saw while away. Sometimes other staff members can benefit from their notes.

At Saunders Brothers, we believe in detailed recordkeeping. Workers punch in on time clocks associated with profit centers. These detailed time records help us determine which products are making money and which are not.

Also, SOP's (standard operating procedures) are written by seasoned staff members to avoid going through a learning curve twice. SOP's can be written for even the simplest tasks. We also develop "plant recipes" that include when to plant a crop, what the soil type should be, when to prune it, and possible pests. If crops require extra attention, we try to determine how to tweak the recipe to eliminate them.

As with anything, good numbers are critical. We developed a spreadsheet years ago that includes all the production expenses associated with a crop. This spreadsheet helps us determine the profitability per plant and the return per square foot.

Growers are taught that spacing can be reduced, inconsistent liners can be thrown away, and percentage to market can be improved to result in a better margin.

In recent years, we have invested in some technology that makes us better stewards and better producers. Examples include web relays in the place of thermostats, a Vapor Pressure Deficit (VPD) misting system in propagation and an Evapotranspiration (ET) based irrigation system. The ET based irrigation system alone saved us millions of gallons of water and reduced our fertilizer usage.

We lock in our gas prices up to 3 years down the road with a local company and have saved tremendously.

What does the future have in store for us? We certainly can't predict it but we want to be more sustainable. We hope to move our Farm Market to an area with higher traffic patterns. We will introduce new genetics and hope to build a gutter-connect propagation greenhouse. With all this, we continue to think outside the box.

Most importantly, at SBI we remember that we didn't achieve what we've done alone. It's been a great journey, and we believe the best is still ahead.