



# Partners In Progress

by **DELILAH ONOFREY**

Editor

[donofrey@meistermedia.com](mailto:donofrey@meistermedia.com)

**W**HEN two friends get together, there's no telling what will sprout and grow. From the very beginning, Elzinga and Hoeksema (E&H) Greenhouses was rooted in partnerships, when Jake Elzinga, Jr. and Ed Hoeksema built a greenhouse together to grow bedding plants in Portage, Mich., in 1962. This was the dawn of the bedding plant boom in Kalamazoo, with vegetable growers converting their production to flowers as their markets moved to farms in California and Florida. Jake's father, Jake, Sr., was a celery farmer.

Around this same time, an innovative retailer named Meijer opened its first "Thrifty Acres" food and general merchandise store in nearby Grand Rapids that would become a model for supercenters to come. Soon E&H were selling bedding plants and garden vegetables to seven Meijer stores. Flash forward 46 years and you see a bright future with their branded Fresh Flavor and Ethnic Flavor organic vegetables and herbs at more than 180 Meijer stores and E&H with more than 30 acres of production at five locations.

Today, E&H ranks at No. 45 on our Top 100 Growers and is run by

Jake's eldest son Mark Elzinga and head grower Roger Rosenthal. Mark bought the business from his father and Hoeksema 10 years ago and learned to value long-term partnerships from their example. "They were best friends, partners for more than 40 years, which is unique," Mark says. "I grew up in that environment. It was almost like having two dads. Our families celebrated Christmases together."

Mark grew up working for his father in the greenhouse and purchased the Centre Street Market, a seasonal outdoor produce market, from his father at age 18. He credits this farmer's market,

**From solar-thermal energy systems to certified organic production and recycling initiatives, Roger Rosenthal and Mark Elzinga are leading the way for large-scale sustainable greenhouse production. Greenhouse Grower is proud to recognize Elzinga & Hoeksema Greenhouses as our Grower of the Year.**

which he still owns and operates today, with teaching him the business side of the industry. "It's our college, where we learn about managing time, people and inventory," he says. "It's hands on. If you lose the night's deposit, you lose it only once. Our greenhouse staff works at the farm market to gain retail experience. Farmers markets are coming back, but we've been doing this for years."

A young Roger Rosenthal, who is now E&H's head grower, started out 25 years ago as a pair of hands at the same farmers market when he needed a job in the spring. "The way I started growing later was Mark's dad told me

to pick up a hose and start watering," he says. Roger's is the classic story of starting at the bottom and working your way up.

## Leading The New Millennium

The year 2000 marked a new era for E&H under Mark's leadership, building a state-of-the-art "new millennium" greenhouse. This is the same site where the new four-acre organic facility was presented to our industry, as well as local and national media, during an open house in March. In development for two years, it took seven months to construct. It's unique in that it was built to become a certified organic facility, instead of being converted after the fact.

Bells and whistles include rolling

## Elzinga & Hoeksema

**Owner:** Mark Elzinga

**Founded:** 1962

**Size:** 1.4 million square feet of greenhouse

**Locations:** Portage & Kalamazoo, Mich.

**Main Crops:** bedding plants, blooming potted plants and certified organic vegetables and herbs.

**Market:** 185 Meijer stores throughout the Midwest and own farmer's market.

**Brands:** Fresh Flavors & Ethnic Flavors

**Website:** [www.elzingagreenhouses.com](http://www.elzingagreenhouses.com)

benches, booms, high pressure sodium lights and the largest solar-thermal heating system in the Midwest. Water is heated by 200 4- by 10-foot solar panels, pumped through 23 miles of polypropylene tubing sunk in 300 wells, 300 feet deep, and then stored in a 60,000-gallon insulated water tank at 120\* F. While Michigan's year-round ground temperature is 53°F, the solar panels have already raised it to 63°F.

"That's 10 degrees less to heat," Mark says. "Engineers say each degree costs \$50,000 in natural gas, which would mean a savings of \$500,000. I can't prove it, but it's what they are telling us and I have to take their word for it. Next year, I'll be able to tell you what the savings were."

Mark says he built the system based on a projected nine-year return on investment and today's energy costs. "If the costs of gas and electric go up, it will be shorter," he says. "The situation wasn't getting any better with other choices and I couldn't stand to not do anything. And I like the idea of not buying oil from guys who hate us. Maybe this will inspire other growers and farmers."

The geothermal/solar energy is expected to provide for 80 percent of the greenhouse's heating needs. E&H also installed two wind turbines to help generate electrical power.

The company also is making strides in recycling and purchased a compactor that creates 1,000-pound bales of 2-mil poly greenhouse plastic or cardboard. "It's not that expensive of a system," he says. "The paper goes to a paper mill and the plastic goes to a recycler. They pick it up. Eventually, all the plastic will go to East Jordan." At the consumer level, E&H is working with fellow growers at Meijer stores to recover pots and trays and transport them back to East Jordan Plastics.

These investments and commitments support sustainability as a cornerstone of E&H's operations and philosophy. "We truly believe that we will see a responsible ROI (return on investment) immediately," Mark says. "Just the reduction in carbon footprint alone justifies our efforts, not to mention the subsequent beneficial effects upon the earth. Our responsibility, and the responsibility of all companies, doesn't just lie in identifying the damage, but also in repairing and rectifying dam-

age we have already done."

### Learning As They Grow

As the head grower, Roger has taken it upon himself to learn how to grow organically. In addition to not being able to use conventional pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, the most challenging part is building a "living soil." To do this, E&H uses vermicompost (worm poop), which provides beneficial fungi bacteria. This is brewed in two 500-gallon compost tea brewers and the brew is applied to crops through irrigation booms. Roger also is using beneficial insects to fight bad bugs and bees for pollination.

Since E&H is breaking new ground in our industry, the company needs to learn how to grow organically from resources outside our industry. It also has had to be wary of various suppliers' claims of products being organic. "There are still things that are not acceptable that we couldn't even bring in here," Mark says. "There's a lot of snake oil, where the company won't give you the ingredients or test results.

Our certifier had to tell someone their product was not organic. There are no lows related to soil and no one is monitoring that. There's an opportunity for us to come out with a soil and package it as an affordable mix."

This first season, E&H produced more than 1.3 million organic vegetable and herb plants, primarily for the spring season. With the advantage of low-cost heat, Mark and Roger are looking at more ways to use the organic greenhouses year-round. This fall, they've been growing 6- and 8-inch herb crops and fresh cut herbs to local health food stores. Mark believes the opportunities for vegetables and herbs are unlimited because there are so many different types. There is a great opportunity to serve ethnic markets and create a stronger offering for herbs as home décor, too. The key is to develop the right offering.

"Our research tells us consumers won't put a big pot of herbs in the kitchen," Mark says. "We interviewed people buying herbs and many of the girls working here fit the demographics as working moms without a lot of time to do things. Just because I think it will sell, doesn't mean it will."

Another area they are exploring is

growing vegetable transplants for farmers. They have one grower customer in West Virginia who needs plugs year round and will be exhibiting at the Michigan Farm Show in December to meet with more vegetable growers.

They also tried growing the finished fruit – tomatoes and peppers – in patio pots that normally sell for \$16 at retail to see if the plants would generate at least \$16 worth of fruit. "We picked every week for 15 weeks since June," Mark says. "Are we making money? No, because we don't know what we're doing yet. We sold the fruit to our own farm market and a local store that could accept as much as we could produce."

### Loyalty Breeds Loyalty

When we visited E&H's open house to see the new organic facility in March, one thing that was equally impressive was the outpouring of warmth and support from so many who were there for the big event – family, friends, suppliers, fellow growers and the top representatives of Meijer stores. We really felt like we were witnessing something special. How did E&H garner all this support?

"We're really faithful to our partners," Mark says. "We're not looking to save a nickel on a cutting but have a relationship that's worth more. Companies like East Jordan, Ball, Master Tag, BFG – anything we need, they'll do for us. I like cheap, I'm Dutch. But I like to see our partners be successful and us be successful with them."

The close relationships Mark has leads to honest dialogues, says Anna Ball, CEO of Ball Horticultural Co. "He doesn't hesitate to criticize us as a company, telling us where we are weak and what we should do to improve," she says. "We love Mark for that because he has the guts to speak to us about our failings and he is always right. We are a better company because of Mark."

Likewise, E&H's long-term relationship with Meijer, sets the company apart from other growers. "The partnership has lasted for decades because they work so closely together," Ball says. "You can't just have an 'I sell, you buy' relationship anymore with customers, and Mark figured that out long ago."

Elzinga also has taken an active role in helping fellow growers in Michigan

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by working closely with them on the Michigan Floriculture Growers Association, which directs legislative priorities at the statehouse and research priorities at Michigan State University.

"Elzinga's have a broad, avant-garde approach to producing greenhouse crops that separate them from the industry," says Erik Runkle, associate professor & floriculture extension

specialist, Michigan State University. "Their push into sustainability, reduction of chemical inputs, next-generation greenhouses and innovative marketing programs are helping move the industry as a whole forward. I applaud them for moving into uncharted waters, because we will all learn from their successes, and unfortunately, also from their inevitable challenges." **GG**

More Online: Listen to Mark Elzinga talk about the importance his farmer's market had in his education and new opportunities in greenhouse-produced organic veg-

etables at [www.greenhousegrower.com](http://www.greenhousegrower.com).

## QUOTES SIDEBAR

"He (Mark Elzinga) is passionate about the industry and it shows. This creates loyalty with employees, customers and suppliers.

Everyone wants to be around Mark because of his enthusiasm. This naturally brings opportunities to him. He is also extremely generous and unselfish. Mark has all the qualities we all should have; He is constantly and tirelessly looking for ideas from outside the industry through travel, reading and talking. Part of the reason he gets all these new ideas is that he has enough humility to be open to ideas." – Anna Ball, CEO of Ball Horticultural Co.

"Mark and I had adjacent greenhouses in Comstock for over 20 years, even now we still make sure that we have lunch a least once a month and talk about the business. First and foremost Mark is a keen observer. When ever we traveled Mark was always last out the door questioning the owner about something he noticed. Mark does his homework before he embarks on a building project or makes a decision regarding a customer or supplier. He believes in asking questions of the smartest people he can find." – Dennis Wenke, Wenke Greenhouses

"Elzinga's are a very innovative group. They are basically staying ahead of what the industry is doing. I appreciate that they are bold enough and care enough about the industry to do it. Mark likes trying out new things and new ideas. Everyone can grow plants but not everyone has new ideas." – Nirmal Shah, Plants Unlimited

"Mark and Roger are pioneers in the floriculture industry in Michigan, the Midwest and the United States. They are thirsty for research-based information and have helped support our floriculture research program financially (along with other growers in the Kalamazoo area at Michigan State University." – Erik Runkle, associate professor & floriculture Extension specialist, Michigan State University

"Mark is a leader, very progressive and not afraid to step forward and try anything he thinks might work. He has a lot of energy and is very focused. He's also 100 percent behind recycling and one of our lead proponents for recycling plastics. He's on the leading edge in a lot of things – the sustainability aspects and energy conservation. We just wish the best for him." – Cal Diller, East Jordan Plastics



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