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FEATURES

Growing Plants Intrinsicly

Recognized as a leading wholesale container nursery in the Midwest, Intrinsic Perennial Gardens has started to gain a positive reputation nationally for its plant breeding and introduction program.

By Jason Bramwell

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One day in 1969, Lajos Horvath went to the bank to start a business account for his new, yet-to-be-named landscaping company in Glenview, Ill. As Lajos talked to a banker about opening a checking account and ordering checks, the banker used the word "intrinsic" in a sentence. Lajos interrupted the banker: "What was that word you just said?"



"My dad was Hungarian and had never heard that word before," says Brent Horvath, Lajos' son. "The man explained to my dad what 'intrinsic' meant: essential by nature, in nature. My dad said he liked that word, and that's all it took."

For more than 40 years, the word "intrinsic" has been synonymous with the green industry businesses owned by the Horvath family:

- Intrinsic Landscaping, a build and maintenance landscaping company in Glenview that was founded by Lajos Horvath and is currently operated by his son, Kurt;
- Flowers By Intrinsic, a full-service flower shop that was operated by Lajos' wife, Trudy, from 1972 to 1992 in Northbrook, Ill.; and
- Intrinsic Perennial Gardens, a wholesale container nursery in Hebron, Ill., of which Brent Horvath has been president since

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Do Latin plant names leave you tongue-tied?

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Located on 23 acres near the Illinois-Wisconsin border, Intrinsic Perennial Gardens specializes in growing 1-gallon perennials, including grasses, ferns and vines, for residential and commercial landscapes and green roofs. Intrinsic Perennial Gardens plants can be found on the roofs of Chicago's City Hall and the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Ill.

While container production has always been the nursery's bread and butter, Intrinsic Perennial Gardens is becoming well-known throughout the country for its plant breeding and introduction program. In the past four years, Brent has bred and introduced more than 40 new varieties of perennials and grasses to the market. (Brent's 'Alabama Slammer' geum was featured on the cover of *American Nurseryman's* December 2010 New Plant Introductions issue.) Intrinsic Perennial Gardens has also shipped plants on a limited basis to growers and propagators in Europe and Costa Rica.

"We have people growing our plants in Australia, Japan and South Africa, too, so that's pretty neat," Brent says.

A family's passion for plants

While tending roses at Merrick Rose Garden, Evanston, Ill., in the mid- to late 1960s, Lajos Horvath would often answer questions from visitors about roses and gardening. As a college student in Hungary, Lajos studied agronomy and excelled in such subjects as beekeeping, viticulture and horticulture. His knowledge of plants proved helpful to Merrick Rose Garden guests, many of whom would become Lajos' first landscaping clients.

In 1969, Lajos and his business partner, Hennon Carson, started Intrinsic Landscaping, a build and maintenance operation in Glenview. "It was a pretty small business. My dad didn't really own any property for Intrinsic Landscaping. He parked his trucks at a local gas station," Brent says.

Over the next decade, Lajos used his knowledge and love of plants to create many beautiful and unique residential gardens in the Evanston area - some of which were featured in *Better Homes and Gardens* and *NorthShore* magazines.

In 1973, a new Horvath family business, Flowers By Intrinsic, opened in Northbrook. Run by Lajos' wife, Trudy, until the store closed in 1992, Flowers By Intrinsic was a full-service flower shop that specialized in floral arrangements, cut flowers and houseplants.

"Houseplants were hot in the 1970s, so my dad would drive to Florida during the winter when he was not landscaping and pick up a bunch of tropical plants and houseplants for the flower shop to sell," Brent says. "My sister, my brother and I spent many family holidays, especially Valentine's Day, delivering flowers to people."



Photos courtesy of Intrinsic Perennial Gardens

Intrinsic Introductions

Intrinsic Perennial Gardens has introduced an outstanding array of perennials, including several selections of *Geum*, *Pennisetum* and *Sedum*.

For a full menu, visit www.intrinsicperennialgardens.com.

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Trudy's Garden, named for Brent Horvath's mother, is one of six display gardens at Intrinsic Perennial Gardens that are used to showcase the wholesale nursery's unique plants and introductions.

As perennial gardening started to surge in the late 1970s, Lajos sold his end of the landscaping business to Carson and opened his third business, Intrinsic Perennial Gardens, a retail garden center in Glenview. Carson became the sole owner of Intrinsic Landscaping and renamed the business Carson and Sons Landscape.

From late 1978 until 1987, Lajos grew and sold approximately 400 different varieties of field-grown and potted perennials. Not even a heart attack he suffered in 1985 would slow Lajos down.

"He loved growing plants and teaching people about perennials," Brent says. "People would line up to walk the fields and talk plants with him."

Brent received his first taste of working in the nursery industry at Intrinsic Perennial Gardens. As a youth, Brent helped his dad weed and dig perennials and sell plants to customers. But it wasn't until he attended Glenbrook South High School, Glenview, that he became interested in a career in horticulture.

"I wanted to become a mechanic, but I'm glad I took horticulture in high school. I didn't realize I enjoyed plants that much, but it came easy and natural to me," he says.

Unfortunately, the retail garden center closed in 1987 after Lajos lost his lease on the property. Knowing the end was near, he bought a piece of property in Hebron in the hope of one day growing and selling perennials again.

From retail to wholesale

That day came in 1991 after Brent graduated with a degree in horticulture from Oregon State University, Corvallis. Lajos and his other son, Kurt, had restarted Intrinsic Landscaping in spring 1988. The plan was for the landscaping company to bankroll a new nursery in Hebron.

Brent started developing the nursery in 1991, planting crops, creating rows and building greenhouses and a pump house. Brent still wasn't sure if he wanted the nursery to be a retail or a wholesale operation, so he asked his dad for advice.

"He told me, 'With retail, you'll have to work harder, and you won't make as good of a living. With wholesale, you won't have to work quite as hard, but you'll make a better living,'" Brent says.

Brent chose wholesale, and the nursery - named Intrinsic Perennial Gardens - opened for business in 1992. During the nursery's first year, Brent used an employee from the landscaping business for labor. It wasn't until a year later that he was able to hire a full-time worker. Brent also had help from his dad, who jumped back and forth between working at the nursery and Intrinsic Landscaping.

"My dad designed and built gardens for the landscaping business, and he propagated and grew plants at the nursery," Brent says. "He also managed three of the four local farmers' markets where we sold perennials that were grown at the nursery."

In 1999, Lajos Horvath suffered a fatal heart attack while working at Intrinsic Perennial Gardens. "My dad was a super-hard worker. He loved working. He would work seven days a week if he could. That's the biggest lesson I learned from him: Don't be afraid of getting out there and working long hours," Brent says.

Bred to stand the test of time

Today, Intrinsic Perennial Gardens grows roughly 700 varieties of perennials, grasses and other hardy plants. The nursery has approximately 50 growing areas and uses 25 hoop houses and two 30-by 100-foot greenhouses for plant propagation. During peak months, which are May and June, Brent employs a team of about 20 part-time and full-time employees.



A gravel garden at Intrinsic Perennial Gardens includes some of the approximately 700 varieties of perennials, grasses and other hardy plants that are grown at the Hebron, Ill.-based wholesale nursery.

"What sets us apart from other wholesale operations is our variety and the fact that we are breeding our own perennials," he says. "We are introducing a lot of plants and have the ability to sell them two, three or four years before most people get the chance to buy them on the market."

According to Brent, the nursery specializes in the following three genera:

Geum (Grecian rose): *Geum* is becoming a top-selling crop for Intrinsic Perennial Gardens - both as finished plants and as plugs. These plants, which are in the family Rosaceae, resemble little roses, Brent says. As of 2013, he will have introduced nine *Geum* varieties to the market, including the new G. 'Sea Breeze'.

"It's our first pure-orange *Geum*," Brent says. "It has a really large, 2-inch flower and a wavy, folded-back petal. Most of the *Geum* that we've introduced have been smaller, semidouble plants. This is our first single *Geum*, with a different look and shape to the flower."

Pennisetum (fountaingrass): About half of the nursery's top-selling plants are grasses, and one popular genus with Brent's customers is *Pennisetum*. He says customers are especially fond of *P. alopecuroides* "Red Head". With green foliage and a red flower, 'Red Head' grows 48 inches tall and wide at maturity.



Intrinsic Perennial Gardens grows Sedum primarily for green roof customers, and nursery president Brent Horvath recommends approximately 30 different varieties for rooftop gardens. Horvath is writing a book on Sedum that will be published next fall.

"'Red Head' is probably our best and most widely grown introduction, even though it wasn't patented. It was a plant that just kind of organically became popular. It's really gotten a good foothold in the trade," Brent says.

A new introduction for 2013 that Brent has high hopes for is *P. alopecuroides* 'Ginger Love', which grows 24 to 36 inches tall and wide at maturity (see the plant on page 24 of the December 2012 issue). "It has a red flower like 'Red Head', but with a more compact habit," he says.

Sedum (stonecrop): Brent grows *Sedum* primarily for green roof customers and has approximately 30 different varieties he recommends for rooftop gardens. He is finishing writing a book on *Sedum* scheduled for release by Timber Press next fall.

The nursery propagates about 80 percent of its own plant material: One-third is done by seed, one-third by cuttings and one-third by division. The other 20 percent are bought from other propagators or growers as a root or plug.

Brent says he propagates plants "the old-fashioned way," using techniques he learned as a college student during a summer internship at W&E Radtke Perennial Nursery, Germantown, Wis.

"Once the seeds are germinated and sizeable, they get pricked or taken out of the seed tray and put into plugs by hand. We stick cuttings and pot perennials from April through mid-September," he says. "Very rarely do plants go from being selected right into tissue culture. By the time we've introduced a plant, we've grown it, propagated it, seen it, worked with it and had it in garden situations for at least an average of five years."

Brent does not set out to introduce a certain number of plants each year; his goal is to introduce good plants to the marketplace. Intrinsic Perennial Gardens' plant breeding and introductions philosophy is: "Our plants are bred and selected in the tough conditions of the Midwest, with hot, humid summers and cold, wet winters. We strive to breed plants, not as a means, but with an end in mind. Our goals are simple: improved, durable, ornamental garden plants for your own climate - and for the rest of the world. Our plants are bred to stand the test of time. If they don't survive or thrive in gardens, why bother?"

As green industry businesses continue to tighten their belts, Brent's customer base has changed.

"In the past, our customer base was 50/50 landscaping customers and retail customers. Now, business is at about 50 percent landscaping companies, 25 percent to 30 percent retail garden

centers, 10 percent to 15 percent green roofs, and 10 percent royalties and licensing of new plants," he says. "Our customers are primarily local for container perennials. But as we are breeding and introducing more plants, we're supplying other growers throughout the country and propagators around the world with our plant material."

One Shasta daisy Brent developed for Proven Winners, *Leucanthemum superbum* 'Daisy Duke' (Daisy May®, US Plant Patent No. 21914), is starting to take off in Japan.

"'Daisy Duke' grows about 2 feet tall and has a really nice mounding habit, almost like a mum," he says. "Proven Winners really liked it and is acting as my agent to license it throughout the world. It was sold in Japan for the first time this past fall."

Another area of business that has grown in recent years is green roofs - thanks to Brent's brother, Kurt, and Intrinsic Landscaping.

"Green roofs are about 80 percent of Kurt's business. I'm guessing he's done more than 300 green roofs, and he's probably the best builder of and the most knowledgeable about green roofs in the Chicago area. So that has really driven my production and sales of drought-tolerant native plants for green roofs," Brent says.

Brent estimates that 15 percent to 20 percent of the native plants used for the green roofs at Chicago City Hall and Chicago Botanic Garden are from Intrinsic Perennial Gardens. He also implemented a marketing program, BIOdiverCITY Blend, that promotes the use of native plants for rooftop gardens.

"There are so many great native plants that will work and add interest," Brent says. "One is *Dalea purpurea* (purple prairie clover), and the white form, *D. candida* (white prairie clover), is another great one. *Penstemon hirsutus* var. *pygmaeus* (dwarf hairy penstemon), which is basically the dwarf form of *P. hirsutus*, makes a great green roof plant because of its red



foliage and winter interest."

2013 and beyond

Besides *Geum* 'Sea Breeze' and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Ginger Love', Brent is also introducing a new big bluestem, *Andropogon gerardii* 'Red October', in 2013. 'Red October' is the nursery's second big bluestem that is propagated from division instead of seed.

"It has really outstanding fall color," he says. "In August, it has burgundy highlights, burgundy stems and burgundy flowers. By October, the whole plant is basically burgundy. After the first frost, it turns to a scarlet red. It grows approximately 6 feet tall and a couple of feet wide at maturity. Like any ornamental grass, you could plant it as a specimen, but it would definitely be outstanding in a mass planting."



Intrinsic Perennial Gardens president Brent Horvath (far left; white shirt) and his crew pose for a photo at the nursery in August 2012. During peak months, which are May and June, Horvath employs a team of about 20 part-time and full-time employees.

Even though retail sales have dropped in recent years because of the economy, Brent Horvath likes the direction that Intrinsic Perennial Gardens is heading in.

"Container production is still an important aspect of the business because it allows us to grow out a lot of our new material, evaluate it and compare it to what's on the market," he concludes. "But breeding and introducing plants is my passion, and now the royalties are starting to pay off. So that is definitely my focus for the future."

Jason Bramwell is a freelance writer, and a contributor to and former senior associate editor of American Nurseryman. He can be reached at bramweller@gmail.com.

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