

# Second Wind

*Industry involvement, family, and friends have helped Gary Roberts build his business.*

Gary Roberts

Bud Roberts

Susan Roberts

Cheryl Robinson

**By Tacy Callies**

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**W**hat do you get when you mix psychology, surfing, and a service-minded spirit?

You get grower/landscape Gary Roberts.

The Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association (FENGLA) recently recognized Roberts' faithful and exceptional service to the horticulture industry and the association with its most prestigious honor, the Wendell Butler Award.

Roberts' roots in the industry run deep. He first discovered the joy of growing and selling plants at age seven, after his family moved from Arizona to an old farmhouse in New York. The young entrepreneur sold fruits and vegetables at his own roadside stand. In 1979, he began studying forestry at the University of Florida, but left the program (he later finished his education, which includes a master's degree in psychology) when the opportunity arose to manage his then father-in-law's start-up

nursery. He spent the next 18 years on his first career: growing Haupt-Roberts Nursery from a half-acre to a 42-acre nursery and landscape operation.

## Starting Over

Unfortunately, in 1998, a divorce and complicated split from Haupt-Roberts Nursery left Roberts with lots of stress and not much finances for starting anew. Despite the challenges, he soon began his second career:

starting Gary Roberts Nursery and Landscape. Although he had to start over from scratch with nothing more than a pickup with 150,000 miles, he was not alone. Through his 18 years of industry participation and service, he had developed an extensive network of industry contacts and colleagues who supported him in his new venture. And in 1999, he married Susan, and she has been by his side ever since.

"I knew if anybody could make a success of such a start-up, Gary could," says fellow grower and friend Bill Reese of Greenbriar Nursery. "He has a terrific, upbeat, positive attitude."

Things began on a very small scale, with Gary mowing lawns for friends. But it wasn't long before the burgeoning business took off. Landscape maintenance led to renovation work, then installations, and eventually a nursery, too.

"I was truly blessed. From the beginning, I never had a day without a job," says Roberts. "I set a goal for my first year to bring in \$25,000 per month in sales."

With hard work, dedicated employees, and faithful customers, Roberts blew that goal out of the water.

## Roberts' Rules

When it comes to running his business, Gary Roberts lives by the following credos:

- Do what you say you're going to do, when you say you're going to do it.
- Make sure you love what you do. If you do, you'll spend more time doing it, you'll become the best at what you do, and if you don't manage these areas, you'll most often fail.
- In business, you need to be a manager of people first, a manager of finances second, and a manager of marketing third. You can be the best grower, but if you don't manage these areas, you'll most often fail.
- You're only as good as your last job.
- Treat every landscape job like it's your own residence.
- Don't compromise on quality.



## Family Ties

While Roberts is proud of successfully starting over, what brings him the greatest joy is being able to work with family. His son, Bud, manages the company's landscape division, his wife serves as chief financial officer, and his sister, Cheryl, provides office support.

"My passion for the industry is growing," says Roberts. "I love riding around the nursery in the golf cart and seeing the plants grow. It's sometimes sad to see them go."

Bud, on the other hand, has a love for landscaping, so the father-son team makes a good pair for a company that works in both sides of the business.

"A lot of people have trouble working with family, but what helps us is being able to express our feelings to one another," says Roberts. "I highly recommend the book *Keep the Family Baggage Out of the Family Business*."

## Employees Are Everything

While working with family is wonderful, Roberts knows that without his team of loyal employees, none of his success would be possible. Some have worked for him for two decades, first at Haupt-Roberts, and now at his current operation.

"I don't consider it my business; I consider it our business and God's business," says Roberts. "I respect my employees and look up to them in many ways."

Because employees are his biggest expense, Roberts believes in investing in them. As such, he has developed three tracks (general nursery, trees, and landscaper only) by which employees can advance. Workers must pass proficiency exams to earn raises. Employees attend weekly safety meetings and education is encouraged. To date, the operation employs four FNGLA certification holders and that number is growing.

"The key is to get qualified people and then expand your business, not the other way around," advises Roberts.

## Giving Back

In addition to family and employees, Roberts attributes his success to industry involvement early in his career. One of the best pieces of advice he received when he was just starting in the nursery business came from his mentor Jim Cummings, a retired Uni-

versity of Florida Extension agent.

"He told me to get involved with FNGLA, Farm Bureau, and the Chamber of Commerce," says Roberts.

Not only did he get involved with these organizations, he went on to lead them, becoming the youngest (age 33) FNGLA state president as well as youngest-ever St. Lucie County Farm Bureau and Chamber of Commerce presidents. Roberts earned the titles of Florida Jaycees Outstanding Young Farmer and Rancher and FNGLA's Outstanding Young Nurseryman, both before his 30th birthday.

"Gary loves the industry and it has always meant a lot to him," says Tommy Aiello of Aiello Landscape, one of Robert's industry contemporaries. "He has given a great deal to the industry and to FNGLA over the years and was an inspiration to me to become more involved."

Now at 49 years young, Roberts remains active in industry organizations, serving on several boards and committees. He also volunteers his time in his local community, where he is a participating member of Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Rotary. In addition, Roberts sits on the boards of the St. Lucie County Agricultural Extension Advisory Board, St. Lucie County

## Gary Roberts Nursery & Landscape

**Owners:** Gary and Susan Roberts

**Location:** Ft. Pierce, FL

**Year Founded:** 1998

**Main Crops/Services:** Woody ornamentals and trees/landscape design, installation, and hardscapes

**Acres:** 36, with 22 currently in production and the rest under development

**Number of Employees:** 22 to 24

**Customers:** Landscapers, developers, general contractors, and homeowners

**Primary Region Served:** Brevard to Martin County, FL

Education Foundation, Treasure Coast Workforce Development Board, and the Pelican Yacht Club.

It's clear that Gary Roberts' selfless support of industry and community causes have contributed to his business success and earned him a respected reputation as an industry leader.

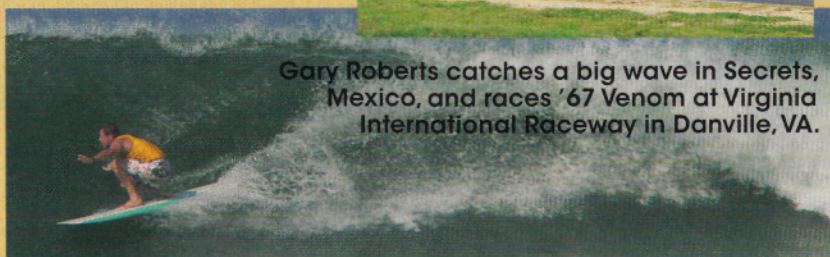
"Gary is well grounded, knows how to lead people, and has a good work ethic. He looks after his own interests, but also the interests of those he deals with. When it comes to my business, I would trust him with anything," concludes Reese. ■

## Waves And Wheels

Fishing, hunting, and golf rank high on the list of popular hobbies for most growers, but Gary Roberts isn't "most growers." While Roberts feels a close connection with his land and the plants he grows on it, he also has a passion for the sea. His favorite way to spend his time off is combining his love of travel and surfing, and he's the proud owner of a collection of more than 120 vintage surfboards. Hoping to pass on his love of surfing to others, Roberts recently started an online side-business with his wife.

**EndlessSummerLifestyles.com** offers a variety of home decor, apparel, and collectible items promoting the surfing lifestyle.

When Roberts isn't riding the waves, you might find him racing around the track in his 1967 Shelby GT 350, which he fondly refers to as "'67 Venom" and still drives today.



Gary Roberts catches a big wave in Secrets, Mexico, and races '67 Venom at Virginia International Raceway in Danville, VA.