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Greenhouses in area tend to marketing



Janet Davies checks on a cyclamen at Lakewood Greenhouse, part of a growers group formed a year ago.

(THE BLADE/HERRAL LONG)

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With costs for transportation and heating fuel rising this winter, Lakewood Greenhouse Inc. has shuttered three of eight acres of greenhouses, lowered temperatures, pared jobs, and made other changes.

But third-generation owner Walt Krueger Jr., hopes a year-old economic development effort to band northwest Ohio growers together will help his Lake Township wholesale business by finding ways to lower heating bills and increase sales.

Improving market share is first on the list for the group of about 100 growers, which soon will launch a marketing campaign calling on consumers to buy locally grown plants.

Named Maumee Valley Growers, the group hopes to head off competition from growers in Texas, California, Canada, and elsewhere by changing the

way greenhouses have done business for decades.

"Growers are very similar to farmers: We've always been very independent and go-it-alone types of people," said Mr. Krueger, whose grandfather started the family business more than 100 years ago. It has 35 employees.

All together, greenhouses in Lucas, Wood, Fulton, Ottawa, and Erie counties are a \$100 million-a-year industry. Lucas County alone is among the top 5 percent of counties nationwide in square footage devoted to greenhouse production and floriculture, according to Bowling Green State University.

The so-called economic cluster initiative is the result of research conducted by Mike Carroll of BGSU and Neil Reid of the University of Toledo, with funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Once the local concept supported by economic development officials and others takes off, it may be applied to greenhouses in Detroit, Cincinnati, and other areas, said Mr. Carroll, an economist and director of BGSU's Center for Regional Development.

One of local growers' top concerns was marketing and branding, he said. The group's name was selected last month along with the slogan "Choose the Very Best," and an advertising push will begin in March, he said.

Operations such as Wardell's Farm Market near Waterville aren't able, on their own, to promote the advantages of buying locally grown plants, such as getting advice along with well-tended products, said owner Tom Wardell. "The resources just aren't available to us as individual growers." He added: "If you go to the grower, you're going to get the service."

Another top concern for Lakewood Greenhouse and other growers is finding ways to cut fuel costs, Mr. Krueger said. Possibilities include forming a local cooperative and asking state legislators to allow them to store natural gas, as growers in Michigan can, he said.

Some local growers have talked about sharing shipments and about specialized crops, Mr. Carroll said. One grower could specialize in marigold production, for example, he said.

Another area local wholesalers need to work on is lining up buyers for plants before they are grown, Mr. Krueger said. "We have to do more contract growing."

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