

CASE STUDY

PROJECT: WHITE OAK GARDEN CENTER

The unveiling of the new White Oak Garden Center was a celebratory event for everyone involved. This project has been at least 10 years in the making, and a dream of owner Jeff Webeler's for more than 25 years.

Jeff began working at White Oak in 1978 and bought the business a few years later. "It wasn't too long after opening the original store and greenhouses in 1984, that I realized how inadequate those low-gutter, connected poly houses were for plants," he said.

"After my two sons, Evan and Andrew, made the decision to join the family business, I began thinking more seriously about replacing and improving our facility. The design and planning took a number of years and kept growing as our business was growing at the same time." Over the last 10 years, White Oak Gardens has bought up the surrounding plots of land, giving them a total of 4.5 acres to work with.

Jeff said he chose RBI because of "their history of quality and understanding greenhouses. They understand the business of greenhouse growing. They say they 'build the greatest places for plants' but I would like to add, 'they build the greatest places for people that love plants!'"

To replace the poly greenhouses, Jeff envisioned a high-tech, all-glass, A-frame greenhouse that spanned 12,000 square-feet. This expansion would provide quadruple the previous amount of room to display plants and still have space for workshops. While Jeff had a clear vision of what he wanted, getting there wasn't without its challenges.

From RBI's perspective, one of the biggest challenges was the complexity of the design. As with nearly all RBI projects, the design is customized to fit the site. Other challenges included being able to connect the new greenhouse to the existing retail store. "We included two different styles of greenhouse (A-frame and open roof). The A-frame structure is 4 feet taller than the open roof and acts as an atrium area/main entrance," Shane Nitschke said. So the team had to work within the space and maintain Jeff's wishes for outdoor space and parking. Typically, greenhouse roofs are made of polycarbonate. The design contract started in 2007!

We asked Jeff what he found most challenging. "Dealing with all the county regulations. Understanding the construction process and how it all comes together. Looking over the design, making changes, trying to think through all the seasons and the differing uses of space. But Shane and the design team were right there to work through these challenges. Also, our site has many elevation challenges and required extensive excavation and walls." Shane's thoughts were similar, saying that one of the hardest things to work through was the use of under-gutter joists to remove interior columns everywhere possible, in order to create the desired open-floor plan.

Construction took nearly a year and required coordinating manufacturing and shipping from three separate production plants, and customization of materials on-site to fit special conditions. Of the guys who saw the project through to completion, Jeff said, “They know their stuff! They will make it right and made sure we were satisfied. They did whatever it took.”

We live in a time where brick-and-mortar stores are quickly dying, and many questioned Jeff’s hefty investment into the garden center he’s owned for so many years. “Perhaps outside looking in, it may look risky. However, from my view, it is not only necessary to sustain the future of our business but will allow it to continue to grow. We see a need in the community to provide a beautiful place for people to gather year-round, to see plants at their best and a staff to help people to enjoy the most out of their outdoor living space.”

One of the more interesting features of the greenhouse is the 10-foot-long end bay, which included a fixed roof and acts as a canopy/porch. This gives Jeff additional space to display plants and provides protection from the outdoor elements to customers and displays.

“It feels incredible to be done. It has surpassed my expectations. I love watching the customers’ faces the first time they come in. They stop and say, ‘Wow! This is beautiful!’”

The excitement is on both sides. “Being able to work through the design challenges and commissioning the design controls to get the greenhouse done has been a huge success. But it’s really great to hear shoppers remark about how nice the new greenhouse is,” said Rodney.