

Steps to GROWING success

Perk-A-Lawn thrives with loving care of Mike and Karen Perkins

The greenhouse at Perk-a-Lawn's Garden Center will be a gardener's paradise come spring. *Photo provided by Perk-A-Lawn*

By *Tambria Leonard-Whitman*

Place a small plant into a container with room to grow

Mike Perkins worked for a landscaping firm in Indianapolis close to his hometown of Lebanon, Ind., as a young man. He was fresh out of high school and newly married to his long-time friend and sweetheart Karen.

He moved to Vincennes and started in VU's Horticulture program. He was ready to become his own boss. So he convinced his brother Frank to join him in starting a lawn care business.

Working from an office created from the front porch of Mike and Karen's home, they hit the turf, going door to door and sending direct mail flyers to drum up business.

It was spring of 1979 and their new business was growing. The brothers used their last name, Perkins and created the business name: Perk-A-Lawn, a play on both the name and indication of their service.

Beginning in difficult economic times, the company had sales of only \$30,000 that first year; it now adds \$2 million a year to the local economy.

Add fertilizer

After two years of working from

their home, Mike and Frank moved the business to a warehouse.

Mike slowly began to diversify the business. More crews were added to continue the lawn care and begin landscaping projects. This provided the opportunity for creativity.

Consistent growth was the reward of hard work. "We didn't overextend ourselves, but grew bit by bit," Mike says. Without borrowing large amounts of capital, they were able to sustain, grow and expand the business.

Perk-A-Lawn moved three years later, and built its present Garden Center off Sixth Street on 2470 Maranatha Lane.

Compost provides a rich environment for healthy plants

As the business grew, so did the need for more employees. "I don't like the term 'employees,' I prefer 'team,'" Mike says. Karen is of the same mind, "They are like family."

The "Perk-A-Lawn Gang," as they preferred to be called, couldn't agree more.

Full-time "family member," Christy Carroll-Lewis has been with Mike and Karen the longest, almost 15 years. She is the nursery garden center manager. "They are so easy to work with." She has seen many changes over the years, but all for

the better.

Nan Luking, accounts payable/receivable, has great respect and admiration for both Mike and Karen. "Oh, they are such great people," Nan says. She is especially inspired by the faith she sees through their giving actions.

In January, the staff was busy rearranging, cleaning and getting the place ready for the busy season. Even in the midst of the chaotic activity, the atmosphere resonates with cheerful effort.

Exuberant is the best word to describe Ryan Lough, media specialist, landscape designer and horticulturist. Ryan enjoys the opportunities Mike and Karen provide for him to be creative. "They provide support for the employee as well as the business. What profits one, profits all."

Maintain a steady temperature

Within their business environment, Mike and Karen each developed their own niche in its growth.

At first, Karen was not involved. While Mike and his brother worked out of their front porch office, she was working at the *Sun-Commercial* as the newspaper's women's editor.

She soon became more involved in the developing business, helping them with bookkeeping and office work.

When Perk-A-Lawn moved to its current garden center location, she created a Christmas Village display. It quickly became a local tradition, drawing thousands of people each season.

Karen began to develop the retail portion of the center. As the village grew, so did her new gift and garden décor section.

What began as a place to sell mulch, quickly grew into a small steady retail business.

Going to “market” frequently keeps Karen apprised of local and national retail trends.

She keeps an eye on the Vincennes market and is confident in her assessment of what the community wants.

She constantly keeps the stock fresh, while watching the economy carefully. “I have to carry things that sell,” said Karen. She is now working on adding patio furniture to the garden center.

Mike recognizes Karen’s strength in retail and his in landscaping sales and management. He enjoys helping new clients turn their landscaping dreams into reality.

Trade shows are also essential to Mike’s handle on current trends and new developments in the landscaping business.

Looking back, neither would have dreamed they would be doing all they do today. “I never knew we’d be this involved,” Karen says.

Don’t over or underwater

During peak season, Mike and Karen can easily spend 70 or more hours per week with long, demanding days.



Karen Perkins awaits the next customer at the cash register.

Photo by Kelly Overton



Perk-a-Lawn expanded and moved to its present location off Sixth Street after just a few years in business. *Photo provided by Perk-A-Lawn*

With different roles in the business, time and personal contact can be nearly impossible.

Both Mike and Karen realize the need for down time. As business demands begin to lessen, they take time to spend with their family, each other and themselves. “It’s our time to get out of Dodge,” Karen says.

Off-season time allows them freedom to do things that nourish them. Like spending time with their adult children.

Their son Brandon had attended school at Wright State University in Ohio. A musical theatre student now living in California pursuing his dream, he can count on his parents to be in the audience during his performances, supporting and encouraging him.

Since Mike and Karen are fans of sunshine and good weather, California is the perfect place to visit, relax and enjoy their family.

Sometimes, daughter Brittany is able to join them there. She currently is a student teacher at South Knox High School and is near enough to keep in close contact.

Mike and Karen use their trips to visit with each other. It is not unusual for them to be unable to see or talk to each other much in the peak gardening season. Flights to California are an ideal time to catch up and brainstorm about the next season.

While Karen truly enjoys her job, she

equally enjoys her alone times away. They refresh and energize her. She loves to read and exercises often.

Once in a while she will even join Mike on the golf course. His love of golf keeps him refreshed. “Sometimes you have to stay away,” Mike says. Since he has to wait until well after June, fall and winter is the perfect time to make golf trips to Florida.

Provide enough Sunshine

Many factors contribute to Mike and Karen’s success. But it is their faith that fuels their drive. In spite of the demands on their time, both commit to time within their house of worship. Once a week they fellowship with a small core group.

“Mike has a heart for missions,” said Karen. In 2007, Mike traveled with his church group to Atlanta, Ga., where they helped and fed the homeless. He would like to donate more time and resources for missions at home and abroad in the future.

Mike attributes “God’s handiwork” for his love of outdoors, waterfalls and his growing business.

After 30 years in business, Mike truly appreciates living and working together with Karen. “She is definitely my better half.”

On Valentine’s Day they celebrated 34 years of marriage in the horticulturist paradise of Maui, Hawaii.