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Retail

Love of flowers turns profitable for Happé

BY EMILY RANCER

Staff Writer

Growing up in the Netherlands, Wilja Happé said her life was always surrounded by flowers. Today, her life is much the same, except now she grows them for a living as the owner of one of the nation's largest fresh cut flower companies. As chief executive officer of Farmers' West in Carpinteria, Happé's company sells about 50 million individual flowers every year.

"It's a fantastic micro-climate — one of the best on the California Coast," Happé said of Carpinteria, where she co-founded Farmers' West 20 years ago. "It's just a wonderful area to grow."

Happé currently owns nearly 5 million square feet of that wonderful area. Broken down, it consists of 37 acres of green house space, 46 acres of hoop structures and 27 acres of open field production.

When asked how she came to accumulate so much land over the years, she answered simply, "Well, you save up and you buy."

"I'm not into fancy other stuff; I'm a real farmer and so when there's a little money available, you buy land," she said.

Farmers' West specializes in bulb crops, such as iris, lilies, dahlias and gerbera daisies. Happé has a team back in the Netherlands developing hybrid varieties of flowers to separate the company from others in the fresh-cut flower business.

"With our bulb hybridizers in Holland, we are always looking for exclusive varieties of our flowers — exclusive lilies, different colors, how they look," Happé said.

Farmers' West primarily sells to supermarkets, wholesalers and online flower businesses. To produce the millions of flowers it sells nationwide, the company employs more than 200 people across four Carpinteria locations, and Happé said the majority of the staff has been with Farm-

Editor's Choice

Name: Wilja Happé
Title: Owner
Company: Farmers' West
Employees: 200+

ers' West for at least a decade.

"Coming from a very socialist country, I understand the value of our employees," she said. "They are pioneers; they are toiling the soil for me, so fair compensation is important."

She said the company's staff also goes above and beyond to support one another through rough life changes, such as sicknesses, divorces and family deaths. The result is an unyielding sense of loyalty to the year-round business.

Happé has also made significant commitments to sustainable agriculture, both at home and abroad. The company's integrated pest management practices, climate-control irrigation, recycled plant waste and reverse osmosis applications have earned the company the VeriFlora "Certified Sustainably Grown" label and Fair Trade certification.

Abroad, Farmers' West has set up a flower-growing program in Rwanda, the African country that was ravaged by a 1994 genocide. Since starting the program last year, Farmers' West has helped about 500 genocide survivors and orphans plant organically grown flowers, which can be harvested and sold to embassies, large aid organizations and hotels, Happé said.

"With all the knowledge that we have here, it was important to me to give something to the women and children there so they can become entrepreneurs themselves," she said.





LORA WEREB PHOTO

Happé's company, Farmers' West, sells about 50 million individual flowers annually.