



Saving water and growing a legacy

James “Jay” Livingston Fraleigh is a proud and progressive grower. It’s a lifestyle he is familiar with as he’s the sixth generation in his family to work the family farm, which is now Gro-Eco wholesale nursery, near Madison, FL.

Fraleigh is also a businessman. In 1999, he founded the plant nursery that’s just a short drive south of the Georgia state line. He directs the more than 90-acre operation with the help of his wife, two sons and about 50 other co-workers (during peak season).

A wholesale plant nursery is one of the first links in the Green Industry supply chain. But like every other link in the chain, it is being asked to produce and deliver its products and services in a more environmentally friendly way. This includes reducing its water and energy footprints.

Fraleigh began getting ahead of that curve a decade ago when, after months of study and hundreds of drawings, he engineered a new way — a less water-intensive, more efficient path — to grow healthy, hearty landscape nursery plants. He named it the Gro-Eco Growing System.

The patented system uses raised beds where container plants are placed in protected sockets overlaid with a drip irrigation system. The

automated drip irrigation system applies the water directly to each plant, and only the amount of water each plant needs. Fraleigh says the system saves 85% in water usage compared to traditional irrigation systems. He estimates it is saving more than 100 million gallons of water annually.

“I’m not digging ponds and ditches and trenches and becoming a waste water treatment plant. Environmentally, it’s the best way I have seen to produce container plants,” says Fraleigh.

There also is an irrigation line in the middle of the bed that maintains the proper temperature for the root system, even in harsh weather. The soil protects the roots of the plants from bitter winter cold (yes, north Florida gets freezes) and scorching summer heat. And with containers surrounded by soil, employees no longer have to set them upright again after a strong blow.

Gro-Eco plants, recognizable by distinctive blue labels, are available at retail nurseries throughout the Southeast. His long-term goal is to establish Gro-Eco Growing Systems elsewhere across the United States — close to locations, including retail outlets, where significant numbers of ornamental plants are sold. Buyers, including the big box stores, increasingly will favor local suppliers for environmental and also economic reasons, he believes.

In 2007, Fraleigh was awarded the Agricultural Environmental Leadership Award by the Florida Department of Agriculture. He says he is flattered by the recognition but stresses he created his production system for a more fundamental reason.

“I did this because I love the industry and at the same time I wanted to improve it,” he says.

Fraleigh recognizes the great responsibility he has to his family and employees. But he’s equally aware of his responsibility to preserve the resources of the region, especially its soil and water resources. The farm has been in his family since the 1840s, and he views the legacy he leaves to the land’s seventh generation, sons Russell and Lane, as central to his life’s work.

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