SOUThERLAND Greenhouses in Bourbon County has come a long way since founder Otha Southerland grew tomatoes in a single 32-by-32-foot greenhouse and tried, rather unsuccessfully, to sell them for 10 cents a pound.

Today, the burgeoning business—one of the largest of its kind in the state—boasts eight sprawling acres of greenhouses and seems to grows everything but tomatoes.

What’s more, Will Southerland, who now runs the business his late father began, has little problem selling his products. Instead, he’s more concerned about meeting the growing demand for those products.

“I’ll never forget when I was working for my father, we had an acre and a half, and every end of March or first of April—two or three weeks before the season would break—I’d see him go in and sit down on a corner bench in the greenhouse.

“He would shake his head. I’d say, ‘What’s wrong, Daddy?’ He’d say, ‘I don’t know if we’ll ever sell all this stuff.’”

“We’ve gone from that to … sometimes, after we go to the meetings with our buyers, I say, ‘I don’t know if we’ll ever raise all that product,’ ” said Southerland.

The greenhouse now produces 100,000 hanging baskets, 40,000 hydrangeas, 30,000 poinsettias, 20,000 Easter lilies, and a variety of annual bedding plants in a typical year.

A few miles away, in neighboring Harrison County, Bob Bedford is experiencing similar success with his newest enterprise, Longview Nursery. It is a picturesque two-acre nursery that lies near the south fork of the Licking River. Along with success, the former tobacco farmer has also encountered challenges.

“It’s [the nursery] grown so much that I’m going to have to hire some help. It’s gotten more than I can handle,” said Bedford, who like many industry newcomers got into the nursery business when tobacco production started to decline. He has operated the nursery on his own for six years, producing at least 40 tree species and 50 shrub species.

“Our business is growing steadily every year now,” Bedford said. “It took longer to get established than I anticipated, but we knew the potential for the demand was there.”

A $100-Million-Plus Industry

Southerland and Bedford are just two of the many stories emanating from Kentucky’s fast-growing nursery and greenhouse crop production industry, a $100 million-plus industry producing trees,
The nursery industry typically markets north, although there is a strong Kentucky market," he said. "We have a longer growing season than upstate New York or Ohio or Chicago, so we can grow plants a little bit quicker and therefore less expensively than they can."

The State’s nursery-greenhouse industry is not alone as it tries to cope with change, however. The College, with support of the Kentucky Horticulture Council and the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board, is leading a major effort to lend assistance to all segments. This effort includes providing educational opportunities, applying research, and, perhaps most importantly, hiring horticulture extension associates to work one-on-one with the heart of the industry, the growers.

They include Amy Fulcher, an extension associate for nursery crops who serves Central Kentucky; Ross Hunter, extension associate for nursery crops who works primarily in Western Kentucky; and Joe Ulrich, extension associate for greenhouse crops.

Fulcher said extension also has "educational programs, where we hope to get many growers together in a room and sit down and talk about things that are happening, address some of the issues they're facing."

The extension associates, together with faculty from Horticulture, Entomology, Plant Pathology, Agricultural Economics, and other College departments, have already been able to count some successes. They were able to help one grower identify and control potato leaf hopper, an insect pest on red maple trees, with a potential savings of $120,000. They helped another grower discover that a manganese deficiency in the soil was causing problems with his trees. He was able to see "thousands and thousands of dollars" in savings, Fulcher said.

"The most beneficial aspect of the establishment of these extension associates," said Ulrich, "has been the fact that somebody from the University is actually able to work with them (growers) on an individual basis and is able to provide demonstrations of different management practices that will help their operation."

"We do on-site consultation, where we go and visit with the growers and see what their problems are," said Fulcher. "We help them troubleshoot and, hopefully, see things and anticipate problems."

One particularly successful program to arise out of the College’s efforts is the nursery crops scouting program started in 2005. It was funded by a Kentucky Agricultural Development Board grant and College’s Kentucky Integrated Pest Management program. The scouting program was developed, in part, to increase knowledge of nursery pests and to help the state’s nursery industry achieve a higher level of pest management.

Each year, four nurseries participate in the weekly scouting program. But they are not the only ones to benefit, Fulcher said. "We really feel an obligation to extend the benefit beyond the four nurseries, so we have, roughly, a weekly e-mail that corresponds to the weekly scouting program. But they are not the only ones to benefit, Fulcher said."

"It is gratifying to see the impact that expanded extension and research programs have on Kentucky farm families," he said. ☣