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Michael DeGiglio

Village Farms LP

Flying fighter jets above the earth's cloud cover, Michael DeGiglio likely wasn't imagining how he would later help propel produce grown under glass to new stratospheres.

DeGiglio, chief executive officer of Eatontown, N.J.-based Village Farms LP, heads one of the country's preeminent hothouse produce organizations.

Sales for the company, founded in 1989, exceed $100 million a year.

The firm during the late 1990s for three consecutive years made *Inc.* magazine's yearly list of the 500 fastest-growing private companies.

Village Farms and the greenhouse industry couldn't have reached its size without the former Navy lieutenant commander's leadership in many different areas, said Albert Vanzeyst, DeGiglio's business partner of 17 years and Village Farms' president and chief operating officer.

"Sounding self-confident even during times of crisis is a big part of leadership," Vanzeyst said. "If you believe in yourself, it's easier to bring vision to others."

A brief 10-minute visit during the early 1980s with Vanzeyst, then an industry colleague on the technical or construction side of the greenhouse business, plus an hour-long follow-up visit at a trade show a couple of years later, led DeGiglio to helping start the hothouse produce growing and shipping and marketing operation.

DOUG OHLEMEIER

Customers and colleagues have called him one of the greenhouse industry's leaders.

"He's definitely the premier industry leader with some of the developments he's made within the greenhouse industry in terms of growing, distribution, technologies and varieties," said Ted Kulpik, partner in the distribution operation of brokerage Coast to Coast Produce LLC, Cheshire, Conn. "He always seems to be at the forefront as the business has evolved."

Kulpik said he's known DeGiglio as long as Village Farms has been growing and shipping hothouse tomatoes and peppers.

"He's had a big role in hothouse category gaining strength," Kulpik said.

Vanzeyst said he thinks DeGiglio gained much of his leadership skills through leading a Naval squadron.

One of the things Vanzeyst said he appreciates about DeGiglio is his quick analysis of situations. While it may take Vanzeyst a little longer to reach a conclusion, DeGiglio can bring a fast turnaround with where the company needs to go and how it can get there, Vanzeyst said.

An example of DeGiglio's quick thinking was last summer's purchase of Vancouver, British Columbia-based Hot House Growers, the largest Canadian hothouse operator.

Hot House Growers, which accounted for more than a third of Vancouver-based B.C. Hot House's production capacity, showed DeGiglio how taking an aggressive stance can be more important than waiting during these days of industry consolidation.

The move allowed Village Farms to ship hothouse product from the U.S., Mexico and Canada.

"When flying jets, it's about competition and winning and never quitting," DeGiglio said. "When founding Village Farms, perseverance played an immense role in hanging in during tough times."

Those tough times included the beginnings of Village Farms when DeGiglio didn't have a lot of cash to run a business after leaving the Navy.

An industry downturn during the late 1990s caused by overcapacity pushed hothouse prices down 34% in one year. The drop happened after Village Farms had built more than 100 acres under glass in Texas and other areas.

DeGiglio worries that today's uncontrolled hothouse growth — especially in Mexico — could cause a similar produce hothouse industry recession.

He notes the lack of product intelligence in the greenhouse industry. DeGiglio decries the failed industry attempts to organize a trade group. North American industry leaders haven't even been able to come up with a definition of greenhouse-grown product.

Village Farms' far-flung operations, from Buffalo, N.Y., to Vancouver and the southwest Texas desert's Davis Mountains, keeps DeGiglio in airplanes or rental cars for 75% of his time.

It's hard to gain some kind of balance when a person travels that much constantly communicating the company's vision to its customers and workers. DeGiglio says he has to be there to feel their pulse.

For fun, DeGiglio tries to find time to enjoy rebuilding old cars. Boating on the Atlantic Ocean in a 31-foot sport fishing boat allows him to relax during the summer.

DeGiglio says he hopes he can find some time to return to the skies where he served his country before leading the greenhouse produce industry to new heights.

— By Doug Ohlemeier

MORE to the story

Background DeGiglio, 52, worked in the supply side of the greenhouse industry during the mid-1980s when most greenhouse operations in the relatively small industry were 10-40 acres at their biggest.

Industry vision: Co-founded Village Farms with Albert Vanzeyst, Village Farms' co-founder, president and chief operating officer, and Thomas Montanti. Montanti died in 2004.

Vanzeyst said DeGiglio's plan to grow and market greenhouse product contributed to the company's success.

"From the beginning, Michael had the vision that we couldn't be a produce company without also being a marketing company," Vanzeyst said.

Business operations: Headquartered in New Jersey, Village Farms has greenhouse growing operations in Wheatfield, N.Y., near Buffalo; Ringgold, Pa.; Fort Davis, Texas; Marfa, Texas; and Vancouver, British Columbia. Distribution centers are in Philadelphia; Chicago; Dallas; Seattle; Buffalo, N.Y.; Vancouver; and Plant City, Fla.

Before Village Farms bought Vancouver, British Columbia-based Hot House Growers, Canada's largest hothouse grower, Village Farms had nearly $100 million in sales. In 2006, Village Farms invested $4 million in greenhouse research and investment.

Education: DeGiglio earned his bachelor of science degree in aeronautical science from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical Univ., Daytona Beach, Fla., 1976.

Navy: Commissioned ensign in the Navy in 1976 and designated Naval aviator in 1977. Released from active duty in 1983.

Children: He has two children: Krysten, 19, a sophomore at Fairfield University, Fairfield, Conn., and Michael Jr., 9.