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Cover Story

Optimized overhaul

Sue Klein traded century-old structures for state-of-the-art facilities at Klein's Floral and Greenhouses, gaining greater efficiency without ever closing the doors.

Jolene Hansen | Photography by Samantha Dutcher



When Sue Klein's grandparents chose Wisconsin farmland to start their greenhouse business in 1913, the location near Madison must have seemed like a perfect spot. More than a century later, few would disagree that the couple had foresight. The business now owned by their granddaughter would be hard-pressed to find a better site.

Engulfed long ago by Madison's booming commercial and residential growth, Klein's Floral and Greenhouses sits on one of the capital city's most traveled corridors, on land that developers' dreams are made of. "My grandparents chose well," Klein says. "It's definitely the right place and the right time."

Fortunately, developers aren't the only ones who dream. Faced with aging structures built by her grandparents, Klein planned for a time she knew would come. It might seem to outsiders that she had three options: renovate, relocate or cash in on her prime real estate. But Klein, who bought the business from her parents in 1990, didn't see it that way. Despite many offers from developers over the years, selling out was never a consideration, nor was relocating to another site. With four children — all involved in the business "in their own ways" — Klein says, "This was important to the family to stay in the same location."

"I just always knew this was what I wanted to do," she says.

Making the decision

The renovation at Klein's didn't begin until August 2017, but Sue Klein had been thinking about it for years. Whenever she traveled and visited other greenhouses and garden centers, she made notes on what she'd do one day. Finally, it was time to act.

The street-side retail greenhouses were original to the business. "You can imagine," she says. "The old wood-frame structure was over 100 years old, with maybe 6-foot gutters and ramps all over the place. Any tall people would be constantly hitting their heads."

The unconnected greenhouses had other problems as well. A hard rain would mean downpours inside, and heat escaped freely in Madison's cold winters. "It got to the point where I couldn't hand-aid it anymore. I had to do something major, or it wasn't going to continue," Klein says.

The old wood-frame structure was over 100 years old, with maybe 6-foot gutters and ramps all over the place. Any tall people would be constantly hitting their heads. -Sue Klein

Staying on the landlocked property with no room for expansion or parallel construction would mean total demolition of approximately 27,000 square feet of retail greenhouses and business offices that were housed in the farmhouse where Klein's father was born. The renovation would start from the ground up.

Remaining open during construction would mean shifting operations to the only undemolished structures: eight old growing greenhouses at the back of the property. Those hoop houses would be headquarters for all the grower-retailer's operations until construction was completed the following spring.

The plan was in place, but when the demolition started, emotions ran high for more than one reason.



Clearing financial hurdles

Newspaper accounts of Klein's initial announcement of her renovation plans estimated the project at \$2 million. That figure elicits a good-natured laugh from Klein today. Once she sat down with contractors, her estimate changed. "What I wanted in a perfect world was \$4 million, so I had to scale that back a little bit," she says.

Despite Madison's reputation for stringent urban-design requirements and rigorous, drawn-out approval processes, the city approved Klein's plans on the first go-round. The final price tag for the project was \$3.2 million, which Klein understood going in. Surprises were minimal and, for the most part, construction went as planned.

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The biggest bump in the road came before work ever began.

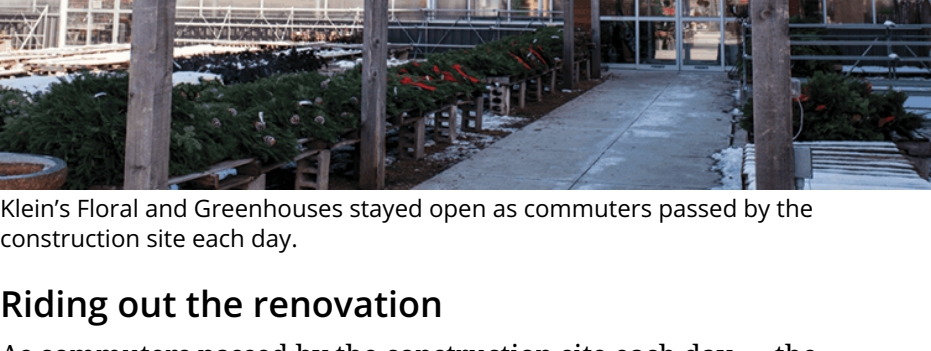
When news about the renovation project broke, bankers came from every direction. But Klein's family had banked with one particular Madison bank since before she was born. "It was still the same account number," she says. "They went through many changes together through the years."

Naturally, she turned to that longstanding financial partner and shared her plans early on. As the project drew close, the bank knew what was coming. "When it actually came down to the loan, they wouldn't approve it," she says. So, she had to look somewhere else.

Klein recalls the day demolition begins. A few tears flowed. "To see the greenhouses come down like dominoes. I'll never forget that," she says. But there was something more on her mind.

"I suppose I can talk about this now, but at the time, I was quite scared," she shares. "When we started demolition, my loan wasn't finalized yet."

In the end, Klein put up personal funds and another local bank looked at her project and her projections, and approved the needed funds. "They believed in my project," she says. "And I'm happy to say that we exceeded our expectations."



Klein's Floral and Greenhouses stayed open as commuters passed by the construction site each day.

Riding out the renovation

As commuters passed by the construction site each day — the Wisconsin Department of Transportation puts the daily traffic count at more than 50,000 vehicles going in each direction — Klein's Floral and Greenhouses stayed open. Hidden in the growing greenhouses at the back of the property, conditions were less than ideal for employees and customers. But they made it through.

Many people thought the greenhouses had gone out of business or shut down during the renovation. Klein worked hard to ensure that "out of sight" didn't turn into "out of mind." She relied heavily on social media to keep people informed that Klein's was alive and open for business, welcoming customers, holding seminars and progressing on the new greenhouse project.

The experience underscored Klein's wisdom in rejecting one developer's offer to buy just the property's front portion. "That would have been so detrimental to the business if we had [permanently] relocated to the back of the property," she says.

Fall and winter passed, construction progressed and, just in time for the spring season, the new retail greenhouses and retail building opened in March 2018.

Operating post-construction

With limited room for expansion, the Klein's renovation brought gains in style and efficiency rather than space. "Right now, we're at about 30,000 square feet for our retail area; 22,000 square feet in new greenhouse and about 8,000 in the new retail structure," Klein says.

About 5,000 square feet of the atrium-style greenhouse area is allotted to what Klein calls "growing retail space." This year that space was closed to shoppers as holiday poinsettias grew and took on color there. The balance of the new greenhouse space is open for retail shopping.

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Growing some of its stock remains important to Klein's identity and the grower-retailer's team. Most of that growing occurs in the approximately 16,000 square feet of growing greenhouses where the team rode out renovation. Major categories for Klein-grown stock include annuals, perennials, hardy fall mums, cyclamen and poinsettias.

The business employs six full-time and 15 part-time employees. Part-timers blossom to 50 seasonally. Klein says renovation feedback from employees has been extremely positive, especially regarding functionality.



As the new space's second season winds down, Klein says customers are showing their appreciation.

"The surface is even; it's flat. We can move hundreds of plants at a time on big multi-level carts instead of just a bicycle-cart load at a time," she says.

As the new space's second season winds down, Klein says customers are showing their appreciation. "Madison residents really love to buy local and they love family-owned business, which we are, so it's just been overwhelming," she says. Readers of Isthmus, Madison's leading alt-weekly newspaper, recently voted Klein's as Madison's favorite garden store.

Klein says employees and customers alike love to watch the automatic ventilators. "In the old space, the growers would have to jump on a bench and crank the ventilators by hand — and live close enough so that, if it was stormy, they could get over here quick enough to do that," she says.

Last winter was Madison's coldest in 30 years, so it's hard to compare energy efficiency just yet. But Klein expects good results. "We have in-ground heat and a high-efficiency boiler. Our heaters are highly efficient and we have shade curtains, which also act as heat curtains."

CENTER STAGE FLORAL

Sue Klein isn't exactly sure when the floral department at Klein's

Floral and Greenhouses began. Her grandparents

grew and wholesaled some cut flowers, but the floral service flourished

under her mother's self-taught hands.

Evidence shows the floral department in full swing by the time Klein was two

years old. An old date-stamped photo shows the toddler at her mother's side, wiring and taping a carnation. "It was probably to entertain the 2-year-old, but I'm sure I felt very important doing what my mom was doing," she says.

The early exposure to floral work apparently stuck. "That is my passion," Klein says. Her affinity is reflected in the department's prominent location in the new retail space — a move inspired by seeing floral designers working front and center at a garden center she once toured.

"It just reminded me of growing up and going to the pizza place where you could see them make the pizza right in front of you. There was a fascination with that," she recalls.

Prior to the Klein's renovation, floral designers brought creations to life in a basement workspace, located below greenhouse offices and storage in a repurposed farmhouse on site. The post-construction placement brought a revelation.

"One thing I didn't even realize until we moved into the new space was that customers didn't realize that we designed the arrangements on site before," Klein says. "There's a cooler in the greenhouse by the registers, and they thought everything was drop shipped in there. I had no idea."

The floral area is staffed with one full-time and three part-time designers. Klein fills in when her office duties allow and when busy holidays roll around.

Weddings are a Klein's Floral specialty. "That department is really increasing. I have an amazing designer who is very passionate about weddings," Klein says. "The big trend now is definitely very natural, flowy, garden-y weddings." The trend carries over to other design work as well.

Klein ties floral into special events, including "wine and design" classes where attendees design a holiday centerpiece while enjoying a glass of wine. "That's led to businesses wanting to do something for their clients or staff that no one else is doing," Klein says. "So now we're doing private events as well."

Looking forward to the future

With the successful renovation complete, Klein now looks toward continued improvements to meet the needs of the growing Madison community. She's been working with garden center design and renovation specialist Judy Sharpton on some new ideas. And with the Wisconsin State Capitol and University of Wisconsin-Madison campus nearby — and upscale urban apartments flourishing — she believes the future looks very bright.

Data for Klein's retail rebrands program reveals customers 25 to 34 years old make up its largest customer age group. "Like every other garden center across the country, houseplants are huge," Klein says. From the March 2018 reopening to year-end 2018, houseplant sales increased 50%. Houseplant pottery is a second big growth category, and container gardens are hot.

"One thing that we're really excited about is container gardens. They are just huge for us right now," Klein says.

Customers currently can pot up containers on site, but Klein is dedicating greenhouse space to formalize the concept. "We'll have a potting bench area where customers can come, a 'leave the mess here' kind of thing, with a dedicated space for it next year," she shares.

Klein also has more renovation plans in mind. "After seeing how efficient the new space is, we need to do that with the growing greenhouses, too, and have it all connected," she says. "We're working on that as Phase Two."

For other businesses wondering if major remodeling is worth it, Klein's advice is to first make sure it's worth it financially, and — if it is — go for it.

"I was very scared to do the renovation and nervous about that, but it was well worth it," she says. "I'm loving the new space. Customers are loving the new space. But probably more importantly, the staff is. It's definitely a safer place to work."

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