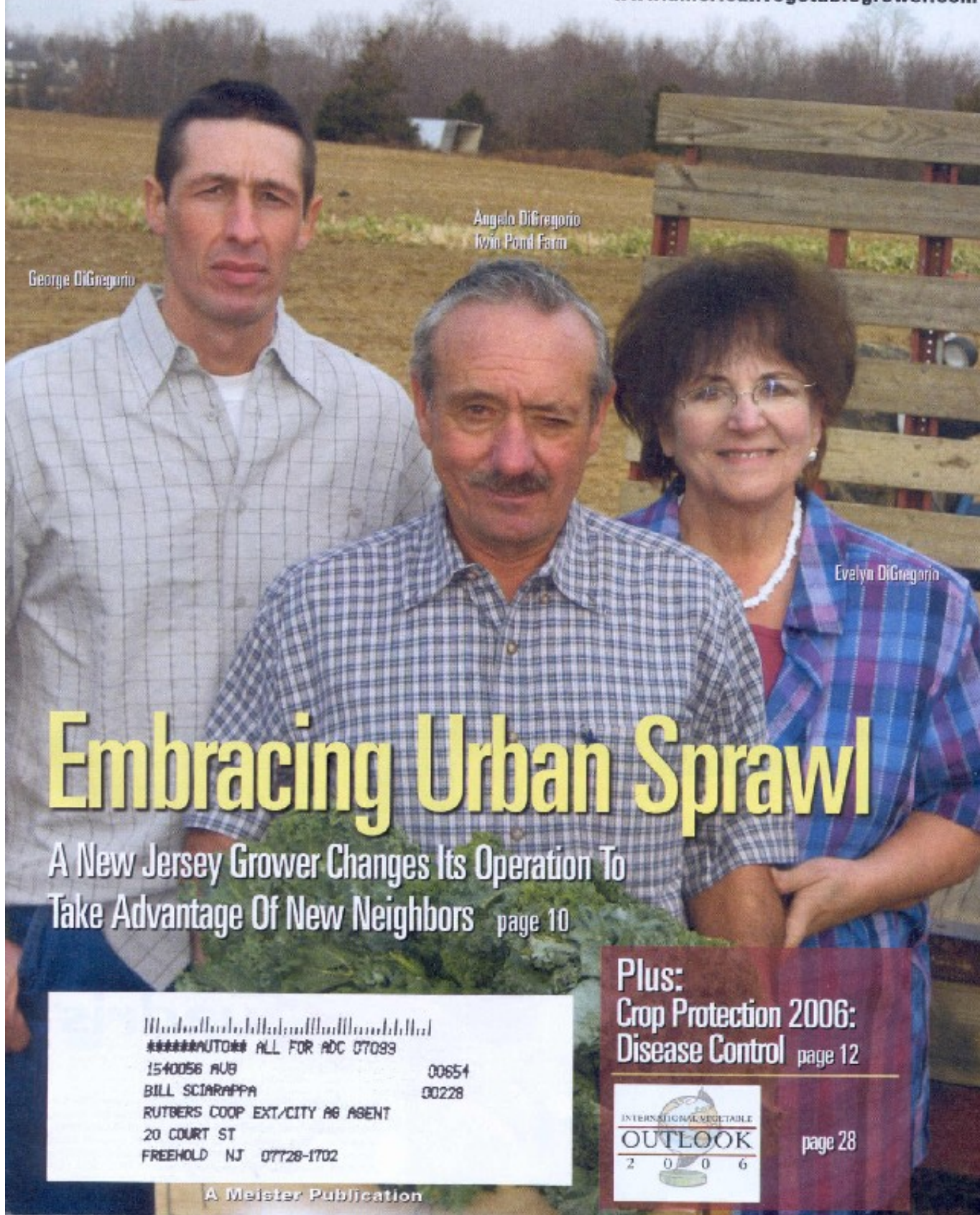


American Vegetable Grower

FEBRUARY • 2006 \$2.75

www.americanvegetablegrower.com



George DiGregorio

Angelo DiGregorio
Twin Pond Farm

Evelyn DiGregorio

Embracing Urban Sprawl

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Adapting To Change

The DeGregorio family embraces urban sprawl, changing their operation to take advantage of new neighbors.



Photos by Bill Sclarappa, Rutgers University

Under Angelo DeGregorio's (left) direction and with the help of his wife Evelyn and son George (right), Twin Pond Farm diversified its marketing enterprise and increased the acreage of the crops that were in high demand at their retail stands.

By Rosalie Koenig

AS you drive down any road in several areas of New Jersey, the most popular crops sprouting up along the roadside are houses. They are large and prolific, and yield high prices to those who raise them. The land they occupy costs an average of \$30,000 per acre and finding land to build them usually means that another farmer has sold out to a developer.

Nestled snugly alongside this urban landscape, however, is Twin Pond Farm operated by Angelo and Evelyn DiGregorio and their three sons George,

Gary, and Chris. Unlike many growers who have both packed up and moved to another rural area where they have started over or sold their land and got out of farming, this family has successfully changed their operation to take advantage of their new neighbors.

Migrating Growers

The DiGregorios can be described as growers who had to migrate from one area to another as the urban center expanded, enveloping and consuming farmland in its path. Angelo's father came to this country from Italy in 1921 and worked for his god-

father for two years, saving enough money to start his own farm.

From 1923 to 1949 he farmed approximately 5 acres of rented land growing Italian vegetables in Brooklyn, NY. In 1950, he moved to Cheesequake, NJ, because there was no longer land available to rent in Brooklyn. Fifteen years later, because of too much development and an unreliable supply of water, his father sold the farm in Cheesequake and came to rural Howell Township to settle on 52 acres of land with two ponds that would provide an ample water supply for his crops.

Angelo was 24 years old when his father purchased the farm. He worked with his father growing a large variety of vegetables that they sold wholesale to markets primarily in New York City. When Angelo was 26, his father turned the business and equipment over to him, while maintaining ownership of the land. In 1974, Angelo married Evelyn and he continued to farm with his father as he and his wife raised their three sons. Presently, Angelo's mother is the owner of the original farm and Angelo and his sons have formed a limited liability corporation that owns the business — a newly acquired farm and two farm stands.

Starting Out Wholesale

Twin Pond Farm started as a wholesale operation growing all types of Italian vegetables. Under Angelo's management, they also grew bedding plants and vegetable transplants to help diversify their operation. They hired farm workers and though the wholesale marketplace, with its rollercoaster prices, resulted in good and bad years for the farm, overall the prices they were able to get for their produce remained stagnant. Making more money meant expanding production.

As Angelo expanded production, however, renting new land from fellow farmers nearby, the housing sector was also expanding in central New Jersey and developers were knocking on landowner's doors offering them high land prices to sell out. Over time, rural Howell Township became a bedroom community of North Jersey and New York City and most of Angelo's farming community had disappeared. Holding onto leased land became a challenge and finding new farmland to lease became one other task of farming that had to be kept up with to keep the operation viable.

In 1990, Angelo and Evelyn began to think differently about their farming operation. Their sons were getting old enough to take a more active role in the operation and they all seemed interested in farming. So Angelo and Evelyn decided to take advantage of the increasing numbers of their urban neighbors and started a small retail stand on rented property alongside a busy road where they sold the same vegetables they had been marketing wholesale.

They continued to build their retail sales and in 1994 they purchased property on a nearby major highway and sold under a large tent while they undertook the lengthy and costly permitting process to construct a retail farm stand. The construction took two years but they continued to sell at the location and build a customer base.

With their retail business expanding and their wholesale business moving a large volume of their produce, Angelo and Evelyn began to see that their three sons could make a living in their family business. George, their oldest son, was very interested in the production aspect of the business and became Angelo's right hand man, taking over many of the farming responsibilities.

Evelyn and her sister took over the first farm stand location and were responsible for retail sales. Gary and Chris handled the retail business on the highway, expanding it to accommodate the demand for landscape supplies and nursery plants. They even began to install landscape ponds for homeowners, to sell scarecrows at Halloween, and to bake pies for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

Fallout From September 11

The DiGregorios were making the best decisions they could to set up a future for their sons in agriculture in the Garden State. What they didn't plan for was the terrorist attack on September 11th that significantly impacted their business. "It was like people in New York stopped eating overnight and the demand at Hunts Point Terminal Market dropped by 75%," says Angelo. At the same time, however, people were fleeing the city and the family saw an increase in demand at its retail stands.

Luckily, the DiGregorios were diversified enough in their marketing enterprises and could take advantage of the shift in market demand for their product. On top of that, they were able to purchase an



Rather than fight urban encroachment, Evelyn and Angelo DeGregorio started a retail stand on a busy road and later built a second stand on a nearby highway.

additional 12 acres that adjoins their mother's property, where they moved their original farm stand.

"In 2002, we started changing the makeup of what we grew, increasing the acreage in the crops that were in high demand at our retail stands and decreasing the acreage of crops that were grown for our wholesale markets," explains Angelo. "In 2001 we were growing about 15 acres of collard greens and now we grow less than an acre. We grew 20 acres of sweet corn in 2001 and now we grow 50 acres. By 2003, we stopped going to Hunts Point altogether and switched to the wholesale market in Philadelphia. Today, we go to the market in Philadelphia once a week to sell our products, and at the same time pick up produce to supplement our retail stands."

The other significant change in their wholesale operation is that the majority of their wholesale customers come to their farm to pick up their orders. "Now we're only delivering to two of our long-time customers," says Angelo. Approximately 75% of their vegetable production and 25% of their flowering bedding plants are sold wholesale. On a typical summer morning, their packing area is busy with trucks picking up corn, tomatoes, melons, and other crops to sell at other local and regional retail produce stands. This is a dramatic contrast to their wholesale marketing before 2001 when they would load up their own produce and truck it to New York.

Today, with George helping to run the

farm production and Gary and Chris running their major retail stand, the business continues to flourish. The farm and retail business employs 13 part-time workers during their peak season and Angelo says the operation works because everyone has his or her own job and responsibilities. They are farming approximately 125 acres with sweet corn, tomatoes, and melons being their major retail crops.

A Supportive Family

Angelo and Evelyn provide the support and foresight to keep this family working together and meeting new challenges. The next big challenges for the business are expected new additions as their sons plan for marriage.

"We communicate honestly and openly with our sons and make business decisions like forming the limited liability cooperation to protect our business assets while providing for their future families," explains Angelo. Angelo says he is aware that things may change as his sons think about married life and their future, but he is optimistic that things will work out if they all remain flexible enough to adapt and prosper.

Hopefully, like their grandfather and father, Angelo's sons will use their collective wisdom and the fruits of their hard labor to ensure that farming is an integral part of yet another generation of DiGregorios. **AVG**

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