



Customer Profile

Houweling's Tomatoes - The will to renew

Being environmentally responsible is always in season, and nowhere more than Houweling's Group. The multi-location company produces tomatoes, cucumbers and other edibles with a distinct mindset: reducing its footprint and respecting the earth. (And producing the best tomatoes on Earth of course.)

"It's always been important to us," says Monica Houweling, product manager. "We believe in leaving the planet a better place for future generations, as long as the solutions are making good fiscal sense."

For example, that dual-pronged approach is the reason their most recent expansion was into Mona, Utah – the location is near a power plant. That proximity allows them to capture excess from the exhaust stacks to heat the greenhouse and carbon dioxide to feed their plants, giving Houweling's the ability to grow year-round. Of course the operation does have backup boilers as well, to compensate when the power plant isn't operational, but "the goal is as close to 100% as possible," says Monica.

The drive to produce year-round is what took Founder Casey Houweling to California in the first place, and they've leveraged the warm climate and extended days of sunshine to their advantage, producing 365 days a year.

Knowing heat was a large cost, the company set out producing quality greenhouse vegetables in the best, sustainable manner possible.

To start, the California site has an on-site retention pond to protect resources. "Water is so precious," says Lindsay Martinez, brand manager. "We also collect rain and run-off water through a gutter system then send it through a filtration system for irrigation water in the greenhouse, on a continuous recirculation loop."

The California greenhouses are powered by solar energy and combined heat and power co-generation that supplies excess electricity to the grid. In 2012, Houweling's became the first company in America to install this co-gen system. The GE co-generation system converts natural gas into power for the greenhouse, waste heat, thermal energy and carbon dioxide from the exhaust into fertilizer for the greenhouse. Currently the Camarillo farm operates three co-gen systems, while the British Columbia facility operates two. The move drastically increased their efficiency.

The company has even patented a special energy-efficient greenhouse, the UltraClima. It uses a special fan-and-pad system that creates a pressurized system in the greenhouse. They also recycle 90% of all waste including greenhouse clippings, shipping it to ranchers for cattle feed.

All told today, they've installed 5 acres of PV (photovoltaic) solar panels, complete water recirculation, collection and purification of rainwater through reverse osmosis, and filtration, solar thermal and co-generation for heating and powering parts of the greenhouse. They even collect heat from the cooler and use that for heat. The hydroponic system Houweling's uses to produce their renowned quality tomatoes uses just 1/6 the water of field-grown tomatoes.

It would take 3,000 field acres to produce the same annual yield Houweling's produces on 125 acres.

"We're also EFI certified at all facilities," says Lindsay. EFI is the Equitable Food Initiative, a social responsibility effort that brings together growers, retailers and farm workers to make food safer. The EFI standard includes guidelines for improved working conditions, pesticide management and food safety.

"For Houweling's, this has included using bioproducts such as BioWorks' RootShield *PLUS*⁺, BotaniGard, Molt-X, SuffOil-X, CEASE and MilStop – and also using beneficial insects." And they're continually tweaking production and looking for ways to move more production in this direction. They use natural extracts like peppermint, cinnamon and garlic for battling pests. "We have our own beneficial bugs and bees in the greenhouse for pollination, so we don't like to use pesticides," says Lindsay.

It's all about growing the best greenhouse vegetables with the least amount of environmental impact they can – and staying profitable while doing it. Says Monica, "It's important for us that both ends match up, so with our sustainability we don't sacrifice production for sustainability or sustainability for production."

Snapshot

Locations: Camarillo, California; Delta, British Columbia, Canada; Mona, Utah.

Acreage: Over 200, with plans to expand.

Crops produced: Tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, herbs.

Subsidiaries: Sun Valley Farms, a distributor based in Loveland, Colorado.

Green production honors: Utah Governor's Excellence in Energy Award - Energy Innovator of the Year Award, Excellence in Agriculture Stewardship & Sustainability Award, Award for Innovative Energy Solutions, Cool Planet Award, Agriculture Sector CA Governor's Environmental & Economic Leadership Award (GEELA), Energy Efficiency Excellence Award