

*Specializing in native perennials,  
Tennessee's GroWild Inc. rides the wave of the green design  
and sustainability movements.*

# Wild About Natives

**M**ike Berkley's earliest recollection of native perennials came while hiking and backpacking in the mountains of east Tennessee as a young boy. He began noticing wonderful, new flowers that he had never seen in his parents' or neighbors' yards and became enthralled. "I had no idea what they were, but I was able to recognize their beauty," says Berkley, now owner of GroWild Inc., Fairview, TN.

The 11-year-old wholesale nursery is approximately a 30-minute drive from Nashville and sits on the Western Highland Rim of Tennessee's Central Basin, among gently rolling hills and hardwood forests. Berkley, along with his wife and business partner, Terri Barnes, owns 120 acres, 30 of which are devoted to the nursery operation and the remainder Berkley is restoring to serve as a model of proper land management.

The company grows almost 1,000 different species and cultivars of native perennials, wildflowers, trees, shrubs, vines and grasses. Mostly through word of mouth, GroWild has grown to become one of the preeminent native plant nurseries in the eastern US.

Area garden centers know that if they don't have it, GroWild will, and the nursery has become a favorite source for landscape designers and architects in search of native North American plants.

GroWild also specializes in native prairie and riparian restorations, and in recent years, it has begun installing rain gardens and green roofs, most recently for the Clinton Presidential Library, Little Rock, AR.

Most of GroWild's plants are propagated on-site and originate from mid-Tennessee and the Mid-South. While perennials remain its biggest sellers, GroWild also sells a lot of native trees, and Berkley has found pot-in-pot production — particularly 15-gallon containers — to be the most efficient.

"We don't have enough flat land here or clay soil to hold a root ball together, so we cannot grow a field-grown B&B tree the way many other nurseries can," says Berkley. "We have very sharp drainage up on this acidic ridge. We have a 7 percent slope that we put 4,000 trees on.

by JEFF KEHE



GroWild offers many natives that are local genotypes.



Swaths of colors among the almost 1,000 North American native species GroWild offers for sale



The robust growth and blooms sometimes pleasantly surprise Berkley when new natives are produced in cultivation.



GroWild's logo sports an appropriately easy-going, rough-around-the-edges style.



Mike Berkley, along with his wife and business partner, Terri Barnes, in their ever-growing, pot-in-pot production nursery

"[W]e grow some slow-growing trees, like oak and hickory, some of the trees that a lot of mainstream nurseries will not grow," Berkley continues. "We'll grow them because they are faster in a pot-in-pot operation under irrigation. The 15-gallon is a good cash-and-carry size. I would love to approach more of the garden centers and promote more of these natives. We're ready for that."

Berkley is happy to oblige any customer who can't find what they're looking for at area garden centers. "We're a wholesale nursery that will sell retail. We do everything but mail order," he says.

**Early, lean years.** After knocking around in the industry for a few years, Berkley went back to school as an older student and majored in plant and soil sciences at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, with a minor in botany. While he learned a lot about horticulture through his major and the physiological aspects of native plants through his botany minor, "there was never a course where the two met," he recalls.

"I started putting the two together. Some people call it my niche; I think it's more of a hobby, a disease or addiction," he laughs. "Over the years, it started out as a hobby, then it turned into work. Then it actually turned into a business."

In the early '90s, Berkley was a buyer for a local garden center in Nashville where the owner was, according to Berkley, "a gutsy guy." "He was one of the first that I knew of in the retail segment who said, 'I want to sell more North



The rolling terrain on GroWild's 120 acres

American native plants and trees other than dogwoods and redbuds.”

As the buyer, Berkley quickly realized the frustration of not being able to find any growers who specialized in natives, despite being located in one of the most active nursery growing regions in the country.

A bulb went off, and a business was born.

GroWild began with Berkley, Terri and one employee. The enterprising new growers rented a Bobcat, an auger and an 18-inch-wide bit to bore out those first pockets for the pots, and they watered everything by hand because they hadn't yet put in irrigation lines. It was a slow start. “We didn't sell things like Bradford pears; we didn't have instant sales. We were doing things outside the box, and there was nobody to ask advice. We learned on our own and, unfortunately, through a lot of trial and error,” Berkley recalls.

**‘[I]t started out as a hobby, then it turned into work. Then it actually turned into a business.’**

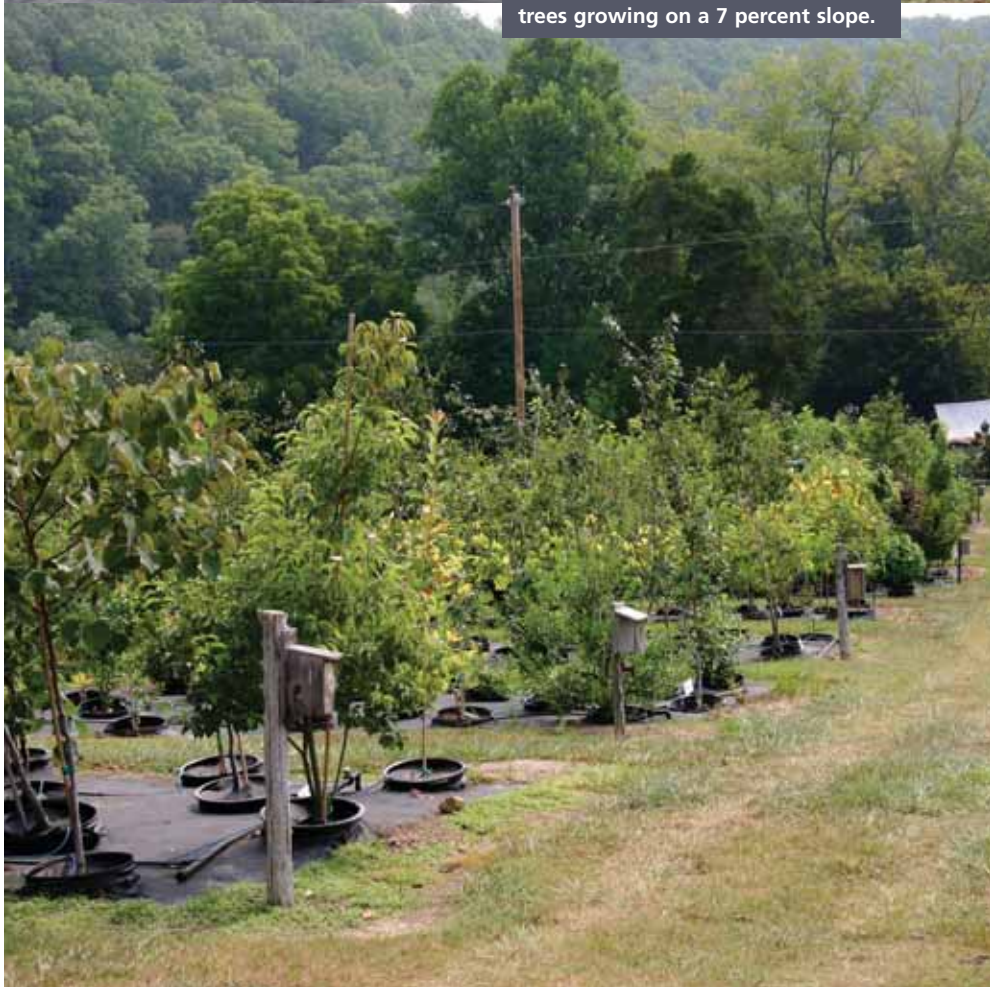
The couple didn't need much help finding a name for their new business, though. “My nickname, going back to when I was a buyer in the retail industry, was ‘GroWild,’ and I had it on my license plate,” says Berkley. “When Terri and I moved out of suburbia and bought the farm here, so to speak, we were looking for a name, and GroWild just seemed to explain it all in one word what we do.

“And our logo, too, kind of fits our whole style — a little rough around the edges, a little more relaxed,” he adds.

Berkley and his wife quickly settled into their respective roles. Terri is the president of GroWild and handles all of the administrative and financial details, while Berkley is the operations man. In those early days,



GroWild's nursery features 4,000 trees growing on a 7 percent slope.





The Nashville condominium green roof after completion



The Nashville condominium green roof project that earned GroWild a reputation in the green design industry and got the ball rolling for other green roof projects

Berkley and his wife literally handled all of the plants they grew, but today, the company employs 12 full-time workers during the peak season and six during the off-season just to keep up.

Still, the business was not an instant success.

“Twelve years ago, when we first started, Terri and I had a hard time keeping bread on the table,” Berkley recalls. “But there is a snowballing movement, and we can attest to that by the phone calls that we’re getting daily from people who want to use more natives.”

What kept GroWild going those first few years was passion, pure and simple. “I really believe in what I’m doing, and I believe it’s the right thing. There is a calling out there for it,” Berkley says.

**Good timing.** In addition to running the by-appointment-only nursery, GroWild also does landscape installations, including green roofs.

It was only about five years ago that the business really started taking off. GroWild had already done a green roof by then, when they got a call from a developer of a condominium complex in Nashville who wanted all North American natives and Tennessee coneflowers. “He had been calling all around and nobody could help him; finally someone referred him to us,” Berkley remembers. “It was a unique application, putting all these plants up on an eight-story building in an urban site like that, and business just took off ever since.”

GroWild is slated to be involved in at least four new green roof projects in the next two years. “When we did our first green roof, we had to get a landscape architect in from Portland, OR, because we had no idea what it was,” he says. Berkley

sees awareness growing, as more municipalities, agencies and the building industry embrace the concepts of sustainability and environmentally sensitive design.

Serendipity also played a role in the success of GroWild. “One of the great things Clinton did near the end of his term was to sign an executive order saying that every federal installation must be aware of and take action against the invasive exotics,” Berkley explains.

Army bases, national parks and the US Army Corps of Engineers, for instance, are mandated to remove invasive plants and put in only North American natives. This proved to be a boon for GroWild.

**‘I really believe in what I’m doing, and I believe it’s the right thing. There is a calling out there for it.’**

“Who can better showcase native plants than the parks?” Berkley asks. “We’ve gotten unbelievable interest and feedback from the parks going more native. All of a sudden, they’ve ripped out their non-native burning bushes and Bradford pears, and they’re putting in serviceberry and black chokeberry.”

Avid gardeners began taking note, and more growers now have these plants under cultivation.

**Big customer.** The government, both state and federal, represents a sizable chunk of GroWild’s business. Berkley estimates approximately 30 percent to 40

percent of GroWild’s revenue comes from government contracts, including the state of Tennessee, the Army Corps of Engineers, the National Park Service and numerous Civil War battlefields scattered throughout Tennessee, that order native trees.

“Most of the agencies or branches of government here will consult an approved list [of vendors] through the department of purchasing,” explains Berkley, who adds that it’s surprisingly easy to get on that list. “You just basically fill out an application and tell why you should be considered. And we should be on that list because we sell Tennessee native plants.”

GroWild benefits by not having much competition. Approximately 11 years ago, Berkley received a call from Stones River National Battlefield, Murfreesboro, asking for some conservation-grade native plants. “I said, ‘Gosh, are you sure?’ They didn’t want any enhanced cultivars; they wanted straight species, and they couldn’t find them anywhere else. They wanted 100, even 1,000 at a time of certain natives, and that’s what really started the ball rolling,” says Berkley.

The Army Corps of Engineers is particularly aggressive in its restoration efforts. When someone clear-cuts a piece of waterfront property, often just to improve their view, that homeowner typically doesn’t realize the government owns the land and plants along the water. The Corps steps in and makes them replace it with all natives, often specifying only local genotypes. And that’s where GroWild comes in.

“The main, ethical reason we started this business is that you see a serious concern over invasive exotics. Kudzu is the No. 1 scourge of the South, of course, but there are a lot of landscape plants that are Eurasian species that are in Category 1 of invasive exotics, according to the Southeast Exotic Pest Plant Council,” Berkley points out.

“The government can do a lot, but I don’t think they can do as much as the homeowner does,” he adds.



Berkley surveys the installation work on the Clinton Presidential Library green roof project.

The word of mouth these government projects generate is GroWild's best form of marketing. "If you sell plants that nobody else sells, if you sell an idea that nobody else does, the word gets out," explains Berkley. "There's a networking that happens out there."

**Extensive testing.** Berkley has found other applications for native plants over the years, especially now with the sustainability movement in full swing. "We've tested a lot of these North American natives and found that a lot of these wetland species, like winterberry, which is an outstanding plant to begin with, are great rain garden plants because they have a lot of drought tolerance," he notes. "A rain garden is only wet when it rains."

Berkley will sometimes literally trip over a new plant in the mountains and immediately wonder what it would look like in cultivation. "Next thing you know, we propagate that, then put it in trial gardens," says Berkley.

Testing new plants is a huge part of GroWild's business. Berkley leaves nothing to chance and trials virtually every plant he gets his hands on, often yielding pleasant surprises.

"What we've learned is that a lot of these native species that have not been in cultivation, when you get them in cultivation, put them in a work bed and a refined environment, maybe even with some supplemental irrigation, they get robust, they get bigger, better, more flowering or better fall color," Berkley attests.

GroWild boasts a trial garden that is unlike any you'll see in a botanical garden. The haphazard layout features a wild array of native plants that were sited and planted as they arrived. Plants get tested for upwards of three years in both sun and shade, and Berkley gives away many new natives to valued customers to try in their own gardens and report back to him.

Berkley also finds himself amazed at the tolerance exhibited by many of the natives. As GroWild becomes more involved in sustainable design, the company has to



The green roof on the Clinton Presidential Library begins to take shape.



GroWild's new green roof mix is 75 percent mineral-based and 25 percent organic matter.

rely on durable plants that can handle a range of tough conditions.

"One of the biggest questions was with adaptability, and we're finding with these plants, many of them do well in shade *and* may also do well in sun within the same species," Berkley enthuses.

**Methods.** Berkley points out GroWild doesn't use as much fertilizer as the typical grower, and its irrigation system is the same as any other pot-in-pot operation, but he is starting to use more subirrigation methods, like capillary mats, watering from the bottom up.

Surprisingly, though, GroWild is not totally organic in its practices. "We have to keep the fungal problems at bay, and we have to take care of insect problems, as well," explains Berkley. "We've got 1,000

different species, so we have to do a lot of spot-treating, but most of these plants are pretty resilient to native insects, and many don't need to be treated at all."

**'The government can do a lot, but I don't think they can do as much as the homeowner does.'**

As far as growing media, GroWild has begun using a pine bark-based, soil-free mix with peanut shells in it, and Berkley is encouraged by the results so far. "We've noticed less root-borne diseases, and we



The south roof of the Clinton Presidential Library shortly after installation



Terri wears many hats for GroWild in addition to handling all the administrative and financial details.



GroWild also specializes in riparian restoration and counts the US Army Corps of Engineers among its best customers.

get better drainage. A lot of these plants don't like to be in these black, plastic pots, so you either change the container, which can be problematic, or you change the soil mix to get better drainage," he notes.

Berkley has also been experimenting with a new green roof mix, which is 75 percent mineral-based and 25 percent organic matter. "Things like native azaleas, mountain laurels and blueberries appreciate that," he says.

**On a mission.** Perhaps GroWild's most unusual plant is the Florida stinking yew (*Torreya taxifolia*). "There's a park in Florida (Torreya State Park) that's the only place in the world where this conifer grows," says Berkley.

Berkley received the tree more than 10 years ago through a plant exchange with

another nursery grower. "It's very slow-growing, and I just read somewhere that it's the second-most rare conifer in the world," he says. "This may not be the No. 1, most mainstream plant for suburbia around Nashville, but the fact that this plant from Florida is doing so well for me here in middle Tennessee is exciting.

"We sell several plants that aren't necessarily the prettiest plants around, but we'll sell them more for ethical reasons," Berkley explains. "I have a tree, for instance, that I grow and sell, where there's only one left in the wild, the Harbison's hawthorn (*Crataegus harbisonii*), which happens to be in a park in Nashville. When that one dies, it will go the way of the Ben Franklin tree where they're completely extinct in the wild. If they hadn't had the foresight in the 1700s to save some seeds

and plants and distribute them in Philadelphia and take them overseas, we would not have the Ben Franklin tree."

He got the tree, incidentally, from the JC Raulston Arboretum at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, which had a federal grant to research rare and endangered hawthorns, and the arboretum contacted Berkley to see if he'd be interested in growing it. Berkley jumped at the chance.

"There's something sentimental about that," he says. "I feel good about it. I am saving some species by putting them in people's yards."

**'One of the biggest questions was with adaptability, and we're finding with these plants, many of them do well in shade *and* may also do well in sun within the same species.'**

As for the future, Berkley says awareness must begin with individual homeowners. "Look who has the biggest impact. It's not us, the growers — we're going to grow what the market dictates," he says. "But if the homeowner starts to feel that ethical movement, pulls out their privets and says, 'I want an alternative,' then the growers respond."

As for Berkley's plans with GroWild? "I want to be a smarter grower," he says wistfully. "I want to get it to where that plant, when it goes to market, is just perfect for the least amount of effort and money."

Jeff Kehe is managing editor of AMERICAN NURSERYMAN.