



*Father and daughter team Jim and Maria Zampini have worked for decades to provide award-winning plants to the industry. Their new venture — Lake County New Plants LLC, Madison, OH, a part of Lake County Nursery — concentrates exclusively on new introductions.*



# A KNACK for New Plants

**A**ERICAN NURSERYMAN recently talked to Maria Zampini and Jim Zampini about their early experiences working together, their dedication to bringing new plants to market and future goals for Lake County New Plants LLC.

**AMERICAN NURSERYMAN: Maria, what are your earliest recollections of working with your dad at the nursery?**

**Maria Zampini:** OMG! I remember putting fertilizer pills in pots with my mom, Marge, when I was 7 or 8! My earliest jobs at the nursery revolved around fertilizing and potting. I recall writing a speech when Jim was selected as the Painesville [OH] Area Chamber of Commerce Businessman of the Year in the late 1980s. I relayed the story that my dad so enjoys telling others — mostly to my chagrin — about one particu-

lar event that happened when he had to watch me, and I really do recall the day it happened! I was probably around 5 years old; I had on my jean bib overalls that day. Well, like most little kids, no sooner had we left the house than I had to go to the bathroom. We were out in the middle of the nursery, so Dad dropped my drawers — and as long as we were stopped he did the same for himself — and we relieved ourselves in the magnolias together. Talk about bonding. When I used this story in my speech it was when I talked about how I've always wanted to be just like him, but in this instance, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't be as good as he was — or [relieve myself] quite as far.

**AN:** How old were you when you started helping out your family at the nursery? What jobs did you do as a youth that helped you understand the day-to-day operations of a nursery?

**Maria Zampini:** I started working on a more regular basis in middle school. I did everything from working in the container area to propagation, office, garden center and more. But you know, the one thing my father never did do was teach me how to drive a tractor. I remember bugging him about it, and he told me he'd teach me when I started shaving my legs. I told him I'd been doing that for about two years. He then asked me how old I was. I asked him, "How old do you think I am?" — and he was off by about three or four years. I guess he was a little busy working. But, he still never taught me!

I think things for me really started to click when I began working at our retail garden center in high school. For whatever reason, I seemed to take to it, and the more I did, the more responsibility I was given by the manager. I guess I liked the learning and sense of accomplishment and being given more to do.

**AN:** Was it always expected that you would spend your career working at your family's business? What is your educational background? Did you ever have any plans to pursue another profession or industry?

**Maria Zampini:** Absolutely not. In fact, Jim probably did everything he could to deter my brother, Joe, and myself from going into the field. I think he wanted to be sure we knew all our options and all the opportunities that could be out there in the world for us. I don't think he wanted us to do it "just because" it was a family business.

I have a bachelor of science degree from Pennsylvania State University. I've also graduated from two Dale Carnegie courses and was a teacher's assistant for several classes. I've tried to take advantage of other educational opportunities, such as when I became more active doing advertising and marketing — I took classes on those subjects at Lakeland Community College in Kirtland, OH. Or, when I joined the certification committee of the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association, I was teased into taking a test — thank you very much, Bryan Champion — and eventually took all three tests for master certification.

I never had plans to pursue anything else, but I think if I had to go into another field, I would become a nurse. My mom is a registered nurse who was exceptionally good at her job. She was taught in school



Jim Zampini (right) instructs Perry, OH, officials in the proper limbing of trees donated to the city. Zampini has donated countless trees to the municipality, both as a means of beautifying the city and allowing the nursery to trial the plants.



Years ahead of its time, Lake County Nursery — parent company to Lake County New Plants LLC — recognized and marketed the "green" value of plants. Taken during the 1970s, this photo is among many historic shots featured in Lake County Nursery's extensive catalog.

to always treat each patient like they are your mother or father. And, she did. Add to that her Hungarian washwoman upbringing and her drive to do things right, and she, too, was a terrific role model. Even though she did not work daily at the nursery, she took her job of supporting my father and, then eventually, me and my brother very seriously. To her, family comes first. Besides, with all the time I've spent at hospitals with my dad for his heart and other health issues, I definitely know what nursing should and shouldn't be about.

**AN:** What are the benefits of working at a family-run business? What can make it difficult at times?

**Maria Zampini:** I guess the one thing — and it is something of importance to us

— is being flexible with work hours: being able to take off when loved ones are sick or for your children — though there were times you had to miss things for your kids because [expletive deleted] runs down hill, and as an owner, you're at the bottom of the hill.

To avoid the risk of incriminating myself, I will plead the Fifth in regard to a family business being difficult at times.

**AN:** Have you achieved the goals that you have set for yourself at this point in your career? What future goals have you set for yourself and for Lake County New Plants?

**Maria Zampini:** Heck no. I'm an obsessive-compulsive Virgo, so I'm never satisfied.

My father has dedicated his life to bringing new plants to market. He says everyone has one God-given skill. His skill is being able to find new plants. He isn't in the best of health, can't hear and can't see, but he is the only person I know who can spot a new tree while going 75 mph down the highway. It was and is his dream to finish his career working with his "grandchildren" — he said finding new plants and bringing them to market was like watching your grandchildren grow and mature. I want to ensure he is afforded that opportunity and that his name and legacy as a plantsman and hybridizer live on in conjunction with the plants he alone developed and/or found and had the foresight to bring to market.

I'm happy to see that more companies that introduce new plants are recognizing



John Lewis, owner of JLPN Inc., Salem, OR, propagates several of Jim Zampini's introductions. Here he shows Jim the healthy, fibrous roots of Celebration® maple (*Acer x freemanii 'Celzam'*).



Jim Zampini, grandson Robert and daughter Maria



In 2001, Maria Zampini served as president of the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association, the organization's first female president since its inception in 1908.

the hybridizer. It seems to be something the gardening public wants to know and is a great marketing tool to the consumer and within the industry.

**AN: What have you learned from Jim that helped you become successful in your career? Does your business philosophy differ from your dad's?**

**Maria Zampini:** In general, no, it doesn't differ: The customer is always right — even when or if they're not; say please and thank you; while you don't want to hear negatives, in some ways they are more important to hear as they show you where you need to improve; treat people as you yourself want to be treated; and, especially, what goes around, comes around.

**AN: Your family has been longtime members of several state and national industry associations. How has your involvement with industry associations helped your career?**

**Maria Zampini:** It has helped in many ways. In no particular order:

- Networking — what a wonderful chance to meet new people and get to know old friends even better. But, the more you're willing to go out on a limb and introduce yourself, get involved, etc., the more it will come back to you in spades.
- Confidence — being able to work with peers, having them seek out and care about my opinion, all means a lot.
- You're not alone — with so many other family-owned businesses, you have people you can commiserate with on a level those who are not in family businesses can't relate to.

- Experts — you have the chance to meet and pick the brains of some of the best in our business, and they're willing to share the information with you freely. I don't think there is another industry that is so open and giving.

As I stated in the "Next in Line" article I wrote for AMERICAN NURSERYMAN in February 2009 ["Common sense never goes out of style"], I have been blessed to learn from some of the best, and that wouldn't have happened if it weren't for Jim encouraging me to be involved.

Okay, so I'm dating myself here, but when I started full time in the green industry, there really weren't a lot of women.

Jim always told me I could do it and gave me any and all support I needed. That allowed me to go places where other women hadn't been before, such as being the first woman president of the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association and the International Ornamental Crabapple Society, or serving in the National Association of Plant Patent Owners.



An espaliered Snow Fountains® weeping cherry (*Prunus x 'Snofozam'*) — a Zampini introduction — graces the garage wall at Decker's Nursery, Groveport, OH. Brian Decker, seen here with Maria Zampini, is a licensed grower of Zampini selections.



Weeping Candied Apple™ crab (*Malus* 'Weepcanzam') is named for a childhood memory and promise. As a young adult, Jim Zampini wandered through nursery fields close to home and puzzled at the Latin plant names he encountered. He vowed that if he ever had the chance to name a plant, he'd choose easy-to-understand names that would paint a clear picture, evoke a feeling or trigger a memory. Years after being told by his father they couldn't afford a candied apple at the local fair, Zampini's first patented plant was named for the memory of that tempting treat.

Called "The Great Zampini," Jim Zampini has joined his daughter, Maria Zampini, to launch Lake County New Plants LLC. During an awards ceremony, the presenter described Jim as "... the man most young men hope to be when they grow up and the man most older men wish they were."

**AN: Maria, is there anything else about working with Jim that you'd like to add in closing?**

**Maria Zampini:** Not everyone has the good fortune of being able to work with your best friend every day.

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**AN: Jim, what has your experience been like having Maria working with you in the nursery industry?**

**Jim Zampini:** For me, working with Maria has made it a pleasure to go to work in the morning, and an enjoyable workday helps keep me young. Even if there are problems, we immediately work together to find a solution; we agree to disagree. I feel that our strengths complement each other.

**AN: What was it about Maria at a young age that you knew she would be successful in this industry?**

**Jim Zampini:** In school she was always involved in activities, like yearbook,

for example, and that type of involvement carried over to her professional life — be it at work, community involvement or industry involvement.

**AN: What advice, ideals or business philosophies have you shared with Maria that has helped her grow professionally?**

**Jim Zampini:** Wisdom lies in the art of listening; praise people you're working with — at work, in the industry or the community; always help people; and be fair. I feel we are each other's best advisor.

**AN: What do you think Maria's best strengths are professionally?**

**Jim Zampini:** Her ability to adapt, learn and excel at things out of her comfort zone or that are beyond her formal education, like writing plant patents — and learning the entire plant patent and trademark process, for that matter; writing professionally for industry magazines; and making presentations across the

country on new plants — not just ours, but others, as well — and other topics.

**AN: What are your future goals for Lake County New Plants?**

**Jim Zampini:** To hopefully keep doing what we're doing — sales and marketing of new plants, and research and development to find future introductions. Keep small enough that we don't lose the daily contact with licensed growers. We've made — and continue to make — a concerted effort to know licensed growers and potential growers/users of new plants beyond a superficial level. By knowing them on a more personal level and learning about their business — physically visiting it and them — it makes us better able to help match their needs to our new plants. We just want to help them succeed in any way we can, and the key to that is building relationships.

**AN: Jim, is there anything else about Maria that you'd like to add in closing?**

**Jim Zampini:** One special touch Maria has is that no matter what the occasion — birthday, illness, sympathy, new baby, etc. — or if it is family or growers or customers, she thinks to send them a card with a personalized note. 