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Brooks braces for success

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

At an age when most men are engaged in making birdies, catching fish or filing for Medicare, Stuart resident Gene Brooks is just getting started.

He's co-owner with his wife, Lolly, of one tree farm, general manager of another such farm, and now he owns a fast-growing new business featuring a product he invented.

Brooks, 64, first got the idea for a new kind of steel-and-plastic brace to support newly-planted trees in 1978. He had his prototype witnessed by a patent attorney, but just never found the time or money to proceed.

"It's a very expensive process and I was short of dollars," Brooks said.

The Brooks Tree Brace came about from Gene's own long experience in the tree farm business where he planted and braced thousands of trees using the generally accepted 2-foot-by-4-foot wood legs, steel banding and burlap.

"It was invented out of necessity," he said.

Finally, in 2002, Brooks decided to forge ahead and produce his new metal and plastic tree brace. He found a Thailand company to manufacture his product and began finding buyers, especially here in Florida.

Unlike the old wood, binding and burlap system, the Brooks Tree Brace has adjustable steel legs and plastic support heads with rubber pads to protect the tree. All metal parts are powder coated and all plastic parts are protected from ultraviolet rays for longer life.

The brace has three legs but can accommodate four or five if necessary. They are held in the ground with metal stakes. Reflective decals on the legs warn passersby.

Brooks said his tree support is quicker to install and is less expensive over the long term because it is reusable.

The old wood-and-banding system requires two workers and 25 minutes to install, with chain saws, expensive banding tools and nails.

The braces are usually on from four to 10 months while the tree roots. Then, workers must return and haul away the old materials, which have often deteriorated or been damaged.

In comparison, according to Brooks, one person can install his brace in just two minutes using a hammer and two wrenches, along with the special key which Brooks supplies for both installation and security.

The brace can be reused so that the owner saves money beginning with the second use. Since the oldest models are just now five years old and holding up well, Brooks doesn't yet know how many times they may be reused, but at least five or six times thus far.

"It's the only system a homeowner can do himself," Gene said. "The customer needs no special tools."

There are four models of the brace -- two adjustable and two non-adjustable -- of various sizes. They support trunks of 3 inches to 14 inches in diameter and tree heights up to 25 feet. Each brace weighs between 15 and 25 pounds and retails for \$35 to \$55.

Gene and Lolly used the local market to work out the inevitable bugs that crop up with any new products. They changed the size of the belt, for example, and insisted on better quality powder coating to protect the steel.

Sales have been good thus far with very little marketing. After selling 3,000 in their first business year, sales in 2006 were more than 6,000.

Their best year, as you might expect, came following the 2004 hurricanes, when they sold out of more than 12,000 braces.

"You have a window of about two weeks after the storm to stand up the blown-down trees and save them," Gene said. "The brace should not be used during a hurricane because it holds firm and the top of the tree will snap off."

This was confirmed in tests last fall by University of Florida researchers, who found the brace the strongest above-ground system.

Thus far, the best customers have been homeowners, developers and government agencies in Florida, including Port St. Lucie, West Palm Beach, Boynton Beach and Delray Beach. Brooks is talking to parks and recreation departments now about stocking up on tree braces before hurricane season starts.

The Brooks are also shipping to customers in other states through their Web site. They are also considering the use of distributors nationwide.

Gene was born in Stuart but raised in Palm Beach County. He started working in the flower business at 14 while still attending Lake Worth High School. He then moved on to landscaping, nurseries and finally tree farms.

He started the Oasis Tree Farm near Pahokee which grew to include more than 300,000 field-grown trees on 850 acres.

In 2004, he sold the business to Tree Town USA, a large company with container nurseries in Texas, but stayed on as general manager of the Pahokee facility.

Gene and Lolly also own Grassy Waters Growers in Pahokee, which Lolly manages. Grassy Waters grows and sells hundreds of thousands of container trees each year, which are then sold to Oasis and other companies for field growing.

With the brace business starting to boom, the Stuart couple has no plans to retire.

"What else would we do?" Lolly said. "We love to work."

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