

GROWING TOGETHER WITH ... COMBIVLIET

NoordVliet, a large-scale cooperation project to be proud of

The videographer's drone needs almost all of its battery power to depict the whole NoordVliet complex from above. That says something about the sheer size of this large-scale project in Middenmeer by tomato company CombiVliet. A project that will be completed in phases over a period of eight years. The fact that they are working with the same group of partners and suppliers in each phase of construction makes NoordVliet ideally suited for the first episode in Priva's new "Growing Together with..." video series.

'Collaboration' is the key word in the projects that are portrayed by means of eye-catching video reporting. 'Growing Together with...' allows leading horticultural entrepreneurs to describe their vision of optimum collaboration in the chain and how they put it into practice.

The starring role in the first episode is played by tomato company CombiVliet, founded in 1955 is now one of the largest and most progressive tomato companies in the world with a total growing area of 97 ha.,. The company has become a major player in the cultivation of various types of tomatoes: round, beef, cherry and – since the establishment in 2004 of the site in Zeeland with lighting – also vine tomatoes. The name of the horticultural company has changed several times over the last sixty years on account of its crop focus. It was called Van Vliet Cherrytomaten for many years and the current name, CombiVliet, was chosen at the start of the NoordVliet project in Middenmeer. The family name 'Vliet' can be found in the site names of the various locations.

Unique project

"Since 1997 we have implemented a structured expansion," says Roy van Vliet, who is responsible for the NoordVliet site. "We decided, however, that we would prefer to pursue further growth at a single location." The choice in favour of Middenmeer was made in 2006. "At that time, together with several colleagues, we were looking at the possibilities for developing Middenmeer into a modern, large-scale site for greenhouse horticulture", adds father and CEO Theo van Vliet. The first phase of NoordVliet was completed in 2011, followed by a further phase in each subsequent year. With the most recent expansion phase 5, the total size of the project is 60 ha. "We do it because it's fun, that's our driving force. Passion and enthusiasm are the key words," says Theo, adding a number of ambitions for the coming years: "We want to carry on with what we're doing, i.e. expand the NoordVliet site to 100 ha. In addition, we're also looking for a location abroad." As chairman of Harvest House, he also has a vision for sales and marketing. "We want to keep improving the sales organisation that we have set up with all the other growers as we want to grow together! It is important for the future that we adapt to meet the needs of our customers and their clients."

Natural process

"Unique" is how Justin Schoemaker from Priva describes the implementation of NoordVliet. "We are involved in many large-scale greenhouse horticulture projects worldwide, but an implementation spread over a period of eight years is quite special."

What is special for Roy van Vliet is his direct involvement, from the drawing board to the implementation of the project. “The fact that it is partly your idea that is shown on the drawing and that is ultimately being completed in stages obviously gives you a lot of satisfaction.” Theo then mentions the ultimate collaboration that forms the basis for the site in Middenmeer: the consultation and brainstorming between father and son. “We spend a lot of time thinking about developments together. In 2004, after the new construction in Zeeland, we started thinking, dreaming and talking about how we could achieve the optimum new construction project. As a result, NoordVliet became a natural process. Roy has steadily become accustomed to the process of establishing a large-scale greenhouse horticulture company.”

One of the complex factors that Roy encountered was that you have to complete things in the first phase that you will only need in the final phase. A phased implementation over a period of several years requires the ability to think far ahead and to constantly anticipate the latest innovations and developments in greenhouse horticulture. For example, it was assumed at the start that the whole complex would be heated using CHP. “The reality, however, is that we no longer need to install any more CHPs, as all future expansions will be heated using geothermal energy,” says Roy, describing an example of how their insight has been enhanced. NoordVliet has a large low-value temperature network, a precondition for the use of geothermal energy.

With a phased project, you must constantly have the final picture in mind, concludes Roy. “That’s the biggest difference from other projects we’ve completed.” He accepts that not everything will work out as originally planned, even if he has to learn that the hard way. “We also have concerns sometimes, of course. In fact, those thoughts pop up every day, but that’s all part of the process we’ve embarked upon.” Certainly, given the timeframe, in practice things regularly turn out to be different from what had been anticipated. “That does not have to be a problem, but I did sometimes find it difficult at first. Now I’ve come to realise that another way of doing something may also be a great solution.”

Alongside the workload and the large responsibility, there have of course also been many memorable moments of fun and relaxation. Roy recalls a bet that he had with his colleague Arjan Flikweert. “We had just installed a water storage basin, which was still dry – and Arjan claimed he could cross it in his car. I won that bet, because halfway across he got completely stuck,” he says with a big smile.

Teamwork

When asked what he considers most special about the construction of NoordVliet, Justin Schoemaker answers: “Without a doubt the project management, which in addition to Roy includes Arjan Flikweert. They have succeeded in achieving every set planting date in practice. That’s not something I’ve seen or experienced before.”

Roy says some of the credit should go to the partners involved in the project. “There are around ten of them and in spite of the fact that we adopt a critical approach to the companies we collaborate with, we’ve worked with the same suppliers in each phase. This creates a highly effective team that functions very well together.” The desired and necessary structure in the project was created by working with a construction team, within which joint project groups were formed. “The important thing is that everyone documents their own activities in the joint project folder,” explains Roy.

An important additional activity that Priva carried out at NoordVliet was the training of the technical staff. “This enables the horticultural company itself to perform the primary technical support,” explains Justin Schoemaker.



Really proud

The completion of phase 5 is a good moment to look back on what has been achieved so far. “I only need one word to describe that,” replies Roy. “Above all, I am really proud. When I quietly walk through the greenhouse on a Sunday, I sometimes think: ‘Yes, we did it!’ That’s when you get a feeling of satisfaction, because for the rest of the week it’s too busy to reflect on these things.”

Theo van Vliet is also proud, especially of his son. “He’s like me and he has the same interests. You could already see that when, as a young boy, he used to come and help me out on Sunday mornings at the various growing sites. For him and for me, CombiVliet is both our work and our hobby.”

When Justin Schoemaker thinks about NoordVliet, the first thing that comes to mind is the ‘massive size’ of the site. “But I also think about the good cooperation between CombiVliet, Priva and the other partners throughout the entire project.” He also uses the word ‘proud’. “Because we at Priva have been able to make a significant contribution to the largest tomato project in the Netherlands.” He is convinced that project-oriented collaboration is a form of professionalism that is indispensable in today’s greenhouse horticulture. “The sharing of knowledge and the cooperation between the various partners involved made it possible to complete this project efficiently. In other words, it’s about innovating and growing together – and that pays off.”

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT "GROWING TOGETHER"?

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