

Kris Creeden, president of C&W Global Inc.;
Tom Marks, vice president of Great Southern Equipment;
and Matt Biegler, president of Southeast Soils Inc.



A WINNING RECIPE

Southeast Soils Inc. President Matt Biegler attributes his company's meteoric rise to top-quality team members, customer service and products

In just five years, Southeast Soils Inc. has expanded from one employee and “a handful of dirt” to the largest custom-blend soil producer in Florida. The state’s \$10 billion nursery industry is just one market segment the young company serves. It also provides its unique, premium-quality soil and compost blends to horticulture, agriculture, turf-grass and landscaping industries.

Southeast Soils President Matt Biegler says there are three main ingredients to the firm’s success: the right team, unmatched

customer service and a superior product at a competitive price.

“Customers are key to any business – and we maintain good relationships by sending out a good product at a good price,” Biegler says. “But I wanted to do more than start a company. My goal was to start a team of good people who love coming to work. If you build the right team, you’re going to have a successful business, hands down.”

A VISION BECOMES REALITY

After decades of blending soils for other companies, Biegler stepped out on his own in 2014, thanks to encouragement from business

partner Kris Creeden, owner of trucking firm C & W Global Inc.

Creeden knew Biegler was concerned about changes taking place with his employer after a corporate buyout. “Kris came to me and said, ‘Matt, I’ve watched you over the years,’” Biegler recalls. “‘You’ve run this business like it’s your own. Why don’t you start your own company?’”

At first, Biegler was the sole employee, and the company had only a small plot of land. “We started with a handful of dirt and a vision,” Biegler says. “That’s all we had.”



“With the Hitachi loaders, you get very good visibility, they’re quicker and they have a tighter turning radius. Our employees are comfortable operating the machine; they don’t feel beat up at the end of the day. And they really brag on the response.” — *Matt Biegler*



Southeast Soils Inc. offers custom-blended soil to Florida’s \$10 billion nursery industry.

In June 2016, Southeast Soils purchased a 38-year-old company called C&C Peat and moved its custom-blending soil manufacturing operations to C&C Peat’s 22-acre location, complete with buildings and other infrastructure Southeast Soils needed, in Okahumpka, Florida. At the same time, the company separated its compost operations into an independent

business, Compost USA, and moved the sister company to a 60-acre site in Lake Panasoffkee, Florida.

“We’re so far ahead of where we should be as a 5-year-old company,” Creeden says. “And it’s because we’re run by folks who have decades of experience doing what we’re doing.”

THE RIGHT TEAM

Biegler says Southeast Soils’ workforce has always been structured according to its level of business. As orders increased, the company grew. “Once we got to a point where I had exhausted all my efforts, I hired my first team member,” Biegler says.

That was three months into the venture. He continued building the team by hiring a new employee every three months until the company bought C&C Peat and moved to the larger site in 2016. Southeast Soils now has 42 employees.

About half the company’s employees worked with Biegler at previous jobs. One of those team members is Anthony Hatz, general manager of Southeast Soils. “Matt mentored me at the last company,” Hatz says. “One thing he taught me was to pay attention to detail – to make sure every little thing is right and put out a good product.”

Biegler says Hatz was a crucial hire. “He brought his expertise and his persistence and knowledge and is willing to do whatever it takes,” Biegler says. “He drove the business to that next level with new technology and new equipment.”

Hiring salespeople with technical backgrounds in the soil-blending industry was vital to growing the business as well. “They brought in a lot of customers who believed in them and trusted them,” Biegler says.

From the beginning, Biegler focused on not only attracting, but retaining, valuable employees. “We don’t have turnover,” he says, adding that Southeast Soils pays team members more than the industry standard and provides excellent benefits and a strong 401k retirement plan.



Matt Biegler says he may have more than 10,000 different recipes for his custom-blended soil mixes.

“If you pick your players and treat them well, they’re going to take ownership towards the company.”

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Biegler says high-quality products, service beyond expectations and good prices are the three pillars that support Southeast Soils’ customer-service strategy.

The company takes same-day and next-day orders. “It separates us because no one does it,” Biegler says. At the beginning of each day, about 40% of orders are known; the other 60% are called in.

And every order is a custom job. “We don’t have standard mixes,” Biegler says. With Southeast Soils’ broad customer base, blends can vary tremendously. The company uses more than 40 raw-material components, as well as diverse additives. “I probably have about 10,000 different recipes or blends,” Biegler says.

EFFICIENT LOADERS

Southeast Soils has put time and effort into determining which wheel loaders – the workhorses of its operations – perform best. Together, Southeast Soils and Compost USA move approximately 8,000 cubic yards of material a day.

Biegler says he prefers Kawasaki/Hitachi loaders because of their reliability and “unbelievable”

fuel economy, but he wanted his employees’ opinions. He brought Hitachi and other manufacturers’ machines in for demonstrations with his equipment operators.

“They all picked the Hitachi,” Biegler says. “With the Hitachi loaders, you get very good visibility, they’re quicker and they have a tighter turning radius. Our employees are comfortable operating the machine; they don’t feel beat up at the end of the day. And they really brag on the response.”

Machines have to maneuver in tight spaces among material stockpiles, delivery trucks and customer vehicles. They operate in reverse almost 40% of the time.

Thanks to the telematics on Hitachi loaders, Tom Marks, Southeast Soils’ account manager at Great Southern Equipment, lets the company know if any issues need to be addressed. Operational data and maintenance reminders also are available. “It’s one less thing to worry about.

A WINNING RECIPE



**SOUTHEAST
SOILS**

SOUTHEAST SOILS INC.'S KAWASAKI AND HITACHI FRONT-END LOADERS:

- 2013 Kawasaki 70Z6 (one)
- 2014 Kawasaki 70Z7 (five)
- 2014 Kawasaki 80Z7 (one)
- 2017 Kawasaki 70Z8 (two)
- 2018 Hitachi ZW 180-6 (one)
- 2019 Hitachi ZW 180-6 (one)

Southeast Soils' operators say they love the comfort, visibility and tight turning radius of Hitachi wheel loaders.

Their service is perfect," Biegler says of GS Equipment. "We can call Tommy at 1 o'clock in the morning. I would recommend the Hitachi product line to anybody, and I do."

Of Southeast Soils' 21 loaders, 11 are Kawasaki or Hitachi models. Biegler says the others were inherited from C&C Peat and, over time, the company is replacing them with Hitachi machines.

MORE GROWTH AHEAD

Looking to the future, Biegler and Creeden plan to expand Compost USA, enter the Caribbean market (the current market area is Florida and southern Georgia) and begin

doing their own product packaging. Ferticomp® has proven successful at helping combat citrus Huanglongbing, which turns fruit bitter and causes it to drop from trees when unripe.

"We're suppressing disease by creating a healthier root zone," Biegler says. "We're reintroducing a high-quality organic nutrient material that enhances the soil, and now we're creating beneficial microbes that are turning into a healthier soil environment. Customers are getting a healthier tree, higher yields and less fruit drop. And they can sell their product as organic."

Southeast Soils can't make enough

Ferticomp® to meet demand, Biegler says. The company will open another facility closer to target markets so it will have a smaller carbon footprint and be able to pass on reductions in transportation costs to customers.

"I'm excited about the opportunity to expand and grow, and as we do, we're committed to sticking with Hitachi," Biegler says, adding that Hitachi's customer service, quality and price characteristics mirror those of Southeast Soils.

"Where we could go is really somewhat boundless," Creeden says. ■