



How Cole's Wild Bird Products Company grew from a hobby to a high-end national wholesaler.

Nature enthusiasts Richard and Nancy Cole loved watching birds flock around their feeders. But the birds weren't flocking. After researching the best formulas to attract feathered friends, Richard and Nancy realized that many seed mixes on the market contained more filler than food. They began mixing their own bird seed in the garage and testing it in the backyard, soon attracting more birds than anyone else in the neighborhood. Friends started asking for the Coles' secret, so they bagged their special blends for them with the help of Richard's daughter, Elaine. Growing popularity prompted Cole to take his product to retailers around Atlanta.

"First and foremost, it's about the quality of the product, because if you use inferior seeds, you're not going to get the birds," Elaine Cole says. "Our family started using the seeds that birds actually eat, and that costs more money. I remember the first retail customer my father approached; the manager said, 'This is too expensive. It's never going to sell.'"

Her father explained the value that came with the higher price, convincing the manager to try it. It sold — rather well — marking the beginning of Cole's Wild Bird Products Co. in 1983. Still working full-time jobs, the Coles spent evenings and weekends bagging seed to deliver to local retailers.

As the company grew from word-of-mouth, it expanded into other products. The Coles decided to open a birding store, but realized they couldn't balance retail and production while working full-time.

Nancy left her job in 1988 to manage the new store. Then in 1989 they split the company in two; bringing Elaine on board to run Cole's Wild Bird Products Co. so they could focus on the quickly growing retail business, Bird Watcher Supply Co. In 1990, Richard quit his job, too.

Since then, president and owner Elaine Cole has grown Cole's from a backyard hobby into a national wholesaler recognized for

quality. Committed to the independent retailers she serves, Cole combines high-end products with down-home service.

"We have a certain reputation that I take very seriously," she says. "Our reputation is the best quality, period. It's cheesy to say,



Richard and Nancy Cole started Cole's Wild Bird Products Co. out of their home. The photos above show the early days of Cole's, before it outgrew the house. They mixed their own bird seed in the kitchen and bagged it in the garage with the help of Richard's daughter, Elaine. Their office and product testing areas were housed in a bedroom.

COLE'S ON QUALITY:

As a small company, with fewer than 20 employees, "it's easier to keep track of the quality," Cole says. "Anyone on the production line has the authority to stop the entire line if they see something that's not up to quality standards."

but that's my name on the bag. I don't ever want to be embarrassed by what's in it."

"The first step I had to take was to get out of the garage," says Cole, who moved into the barn of a local feed-and-seed store that had extra space. "For many, many years, we made deals with retail centers that had empty space. We'd pay them a miniscule amount of money to lease their unused space, and then move out once they



Founders Richard and Nancy Cole surrounded by family.



"I remember being terrified that it was going to bankrupt the company," she says.

"But within a year, we had to get more space, and then a few years after that, even more space."

Leveraging the advantages of a small, family-owned business, Cole's innovated as it grew. Using her father's retail locations as testing grounds, Cole trialed new products to gather customer feedback.

"That enabled us to quickly improve," she says. "Because we're small, we don't have layers of management or bureaucracy, so we can change faster, adapt faster and try new things faster."

Keen on quality, Cole's developed seed mixes like Special Feeder™ and Blue Ribbon Blend™ to attract a variety of birds. Using technology from the human food industry, Cole's developed a "hot" line of products infused with habanero chili oil. Products like the Blazing Hot Blend™ and Flaming Squirrel Seed Sauce™ capitalize on the taste preferences of spice-loving birds that don't feel the heat, and those of squirrels and other mammals that dislike hot flavors.

Across the country's more birds flocked to Cole's seeds, more customers flocked to retailers — prompting the company to go national about 10 years ago.

"We were getting a lot of interest from other parts of the country," Cole says, "but we didn't have a way to get it there because bird seed is inherently perishable. How much you bought was a function of how much you could sell in a certain amount of time. Customers on the west coast don't want to buy a truckload of seed — which it would take, freight-wise, to make it affordable — because they

rented it. We kept moving, but we saved so much rent money which enabled us to grow."

Finally, in 1998, Cole signed the company's first long-term lease.



didn't think they could sell a truckload before it went bad."

To extend its shelf life, Cole's changed its product packaging. The company adopted another process from the human food industry, rarely used for animal products, called nitrogen purged barrier packaging. By removing oxygen and filling the bag with nitrogen, it is possible to prevent spoilage without chemical preservatives or pesticides. The change increased shelf life from two to four weeks, to two to three years.

"That opened up doors to other markets," says Cole, who began working with distributors to wholesale seed and suet throughout the country. Independent retailers in nearly every contiguous state now carry Cole's products.

Last year, Cole's started selling bird feeders, which retailers had been requesting for years. "I resisted for a long time because I didn't want to do something unless I could improve it," Cole says. The feeders, which are made in America with a lifetime guarantee, feature a patented Quick-Clean® base that snaps off with a click for easy cleaning.

For most wild bird feed companies, feeding wild birds is just a sideline business. It's either an offshoot of their pet food line or a seasonal replacement for when their grass seed sales slow down. At Cole's, feeding and attracting wild birds is the sole focus of everything they do. Today, a little over 30 years after making that first bag of seed in their garage, the Coles are known throughout the birding community as leading experts and trailblazers in feeding and attracting wild birds.



Through their never-ending quest for enjoying beautiful songbirds up close and personal, they developed the most complete line of wild bird feed based on factual research about what birds really eat. In addition to top of the line blends and straight seeds, they specialize in exclusive "hot" wild bird feeds designed to make your feeder a birds-only cafe. Many of their nationally recognized best sellers have been featured in such high profile magazines as Better Homes and Gardens, Reader's Digest, Town & Country, Southern Living, and Birds & Blooms magazine.

Cole's believes that birds are like people, give them what they like to eat and they'll come back and bring their friends. After all, if you just want birdseed, buy any brand — if you really want birds, buy Cole's.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON OUR COMPANY AND OUR PRODUCTS VISIT US ONLINE AT:

WWW.COLESWILDBIRD.COM. VISIT US ON FACEBOOK!