Fourth Time is the Charm: Centerville Greenhouses

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There seems to be a “buy-twice” pattern for many consumers when it comes to buying a generator for home or business standby power. In the home, it’s often a portable generator first, then a robust standby generator with automatic transfer and no need for re-fueling. In a business, it’s typically a small generator first, and later, as power needs grow, a powerhouse that can handle the full load, that exercises itself, and that keeps on humming for years and years.

In both cases, there’s a tendency to underestimate how much backup power is really needed to power a home or business through an extended outage. Consider the “buy four times” story of Centerville Greenhouses & Nursery, as told by owner Rob Lind.

“Centerville Greenhouses started back in 1972 when my folks bought a rundown greenhouse in southern Iowa. Back then terrariums were a big trend; it seemed like every college dorm room had one. We saw a specialty niche and grew the plants for them — a million, a million and a half of them a year. All this out of a 15,000 sq. ft. greenhouse!

“But we lived in fear of an ice storm that could knock out our power. All we had for backup then was an old 5 kW army surplus generator. It was hooked up to run just a few things, including the boiler burner. You had to be there to make all the transfers, and then you had to babysit it.”

As the business expanded through the 1980s and 90s, the greenhouse grew to 25,000 sq. ft. More standby power was needed and Centerville Greenhouses upgraded to a 7.5 kW generator.

“Generator number two wasn’t a Kohler,” says Lind, “and we had our headaches with that one, too. We had an ice storm and a 14-hour outage and we had to do the transfers, shut it down to add oil and start it again. We realized then how important it was to have a generator to run the entire place.”

Then the year 2000 and Y2K loomed. “We were expanding during the winter of 1999. The federal government and our bank were lending money for better backup power in case the grid went down, so I got to thinking, ‘I don’t want to mess around with another little generator.’ A friend of mine up in Des Moines had a large greenhouse and they were going with a Kohler generator. I thought we should do the same, probably a 60 kW.

“Kohler has always meant quality to us — whenever we replaced anything like a faucet, we’d always go with Kohler. I don’t want the hassle of replacing something in five or ten years. I want it to be good. Same with engines, like the KOHLER Command we have on our mower.”

But long story short, the local electric utility stepped in and suggested a non-Kohler generator with local support. And Lind ended up going with what was recommended — a 45 kW generator with auto transfer. Lind felt safe hearing the weekly generator exercises, but he was unhappy when the utility later went back on the service agreement.

“What happened with generator number three was, we switched it to run afternoons when all the fans were going and power usage was maxed out, and it really struggled to keep up. We realized we couldn’t count on it to take care of the whole place.”

Lind knew that this time he was, “going to settle this once and for all: go big and go Kohler!” Lind donated the 45 kW generator to the city, and now generator number four is an 80 kW Kohler, “with a good 20% of headroom” that “just sings” while carrying a full load.

“Nothing makes you sleep better at night than to know that you’re not going to walk in the greenhouse one day and find out everything froze the night before. We’ve made it known that if there’s an outage, there’s going to be a party here at the greenhouse until the line power comes back on,” says Lind.