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Blairsville site about 30 years ago from Gene Greiling, who built it to grow pansies, a cool-weather plant.

Historically, the Blairsville location only grew ornamental transplants like pansies, but it began growing vegetable transplants about six or seven years ago.

Typically, when plants are about six weeks old, they're shipped to customers both close by and as far away as Colorado and Michigan, and the goal of every Speedling employee is to make their customers successful.

"As the name implies, we want to get their plants to them quickly, but then we want them to succeed - we need our customers to succeed," he said.

Davis, a fifth generation north Florida farmer himself, said he came aboard with Speedling 10 years ago, bringing this mindset to the company.

"What's most rewarding is seeing people like (Blairsville Site Nursery Manager Morris Graves), people like (Blairsville Grower Manager Ben Chester), people all over the country, that step up and take ownership of their piece of the Speedling pie," said Davis. "It's a neat mix of corporate and family."

"You'll see a lot of hugging and all of that - we're a family. But we're still a corporation and a big enough company that we have to do a lot of things like a corporation."

Davis said he sees a lot of change going forward, noting that the company is going to have to find ways "to do far more with far less."

Blairsville presents one of the most difficult labor



This is what 1.1 million little pansies looks like inside Speedling Nursery. Photo by Mark Smith



A tiny pansy plant grown by Speedling in Blairsville. Photo by Mark Smith

situations in the country, said Davis, adding that it's not unusual for the Blairsville site to operate with fewer employees than it needs, even though it's one of the most labor-efficient sites in the whole company.

When Davis started with Speedling 10 years ago, there were about 750 employees company-wide. With the

advent of automation and mechanization, that number has dropped to around 500, and Davis is aiming to further reduce the number to 250.

"It's not because I want to, it's because I have to," he said. "Automation, mechanization - I fought against that for a number of years. Now, I don't have any choice but to embrace that concept of automation, mechanization, fewer people."

When asked about partnering with schools, Davis said that, because their busy season is in the winter when they really need people, and interns can usually only work in the summer, it's not a match.

Speedling does have a few yearly interns from outside the U.S., he said, but they are very difficult to hire here permanently.

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