

This Family-Owned Business is Building Better Gardens While Reducing Greenhouse Gases

Tony Marrero and his twin brother, Tom, launched Wakefield BioChar in 2014. But they give credit to their dad, Thomas R. Marrero, a longtime professor of chemical engineering at the University of Missouri, who came up with the idea for the product that is now on the shelves of Meijer stores across the Midwest.

From what began with some advice, soon turned into a business venture.

“My dad suggested I put biochar in the soil and try again. Five days later, I had grass growing,” Founder Tony Marrero said. “It really solves the problem. It helps stabilize things and lets natural processes really start to happen and allows the seed of the grass to germinate.”

BioChar has been used for many years as a soil amendment. It’s a stable solid, rich in carbon that is made from organic waste material or biomass that is pyrolyzed. Pyrolysis is a process where organic materials are heated in the absence of oxygen. The result is a very high-carbon granule char. The qualities that make up biochar vary depending upon the material that it comes from. Wakefield BioChar is made using waste wood.

“At the time, my dad had been doing some research on biochar and we thought, we’ll start a blog website, and we called it Wakefield BioChar,” Tony said.

After their father passed in 2015, Tony and Tom continued his work and slowly grew Wakefield BioChar to a business that now has more than 80 employees. They also moved their original operations in Columbia, Missouri to Valdosta, Georgia, to be closer to the raw materials.

The brothers are a good team. Tom has a PhD in analytical chemistry and Tony has a background in marketing and business development.

“We understand the science of biochar and we know biochar improves the health of any soil. Plus, carbon-rich soil has so many other environmental benefits,” Tony said. “Sustainability is a top priority for our team. Wakefield’s staff works hard to educate about the environmental benefits of biochar, including that using biochar helps reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.”

In 2023, the product was officially on Meijer shelves and continues to grow its Meijer presence across the Midwest.

“During COVID, I think a lot of us found our backyard again,” said Tony, explaining why he thinks the product attracted a following so quickly. “The growth in our business allowed us to gain the confidence we needed to go into retailers like Meijer to show this is a good product.”

The company is working with our Supplier Inclusion Team to learn how to grow as a small business supplier with Meijer.

“We have taken advantage of the programs, webinars and sessions to support growing small businesses and how to partner with buyers,” Tony said. “We started as a family business that was focused on education and creating awareness. We’ve always been excited about supporting our community and those who want to create a better world.”

One way the company supports the community is by donating its product to the Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture in Columbia, Missouri. The nonprofit provides 30,000 lbs of fresh produce every year to community members in need while teaching skills in home gardening, agriculture, and cooking.

We’re glad to support Wakefield BioChar’s commitment to sustainability and the community.

Additional assets available online:  [Photos](#) ⁽¹⁾

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