

You won't find this farmer sitting down on the job

By SUSAN KAUFFMAN
Staff Writer

Did you know that among the members of the Pennsylvania Farmers association is a cactus grower? It's true! Just south of West Chester, Chester County, there is an acre enclosed in greenhouses devoted entirely to the culture and growth of cacti.

The agricultural business presently established at this site is said to be the largest grower of cacti in the Eastern United States. With three large and two smaller greenhouses providing the proper growing environment which is cooler and damper than usually expected for what are typically thought of as desert plants, Far-Out Cactus, Inc. operates its wholesale business.

Operational manager and part owner of Far-Out Cactus, Richard Lenat explained the requirements for raising and marketing cacti and briefly traced his eight years in the business.

When asked why a cactus grower belonged to PFA, Lenat replied, "We are all farmers of one sort or another. It is just that I work in a totally controlled environment while other agricultural businesses such as animals operate in the out-of-doors."

Lenat went on to add that he learns a lot of useful information from the PFA publications. As is the case with every other farming venture, Cactus growing takes knowledge, much of it learned through experience, a real interest in the business, good management, adaptability and financial backing.

Once an educator in the public schools, Lenat actually got his start in the cactus field with a pushcart on which he sold his wares on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia in 1971. "It was just a hobby of mine to grow them. I learned by trial and error," he explained.

After that initial start for a year, Far-Out Cactus opened for business with two other partners, Gary Hersch and Paul Weintraud, at a Toughkenamon location. Two years later, the corporation moved its business to the present site in East Bradford Township, seven miles north of Longwood Gardens along Route 52.

Of the four and one-half years that the business has been established at its present site, it has been a member for three years to Pennsylvania Farmers Association and conducted or opened for the group's tours each year for Chester County. Although the business is geared primarily to wholesale marketing, Lenat said that the public is always welcome to come to look or to buy individual plants or groups of plantings as they are usually marketed.

In the earlier days of this particular business, direct retail sales to local customers was the rule. "As the plant buying locally levelled off, marketing in wholesale became a reality," Lenat explained. Presently Far-Out Cactus supplies the major chain stores in the eastern half of the United States and Canada with their assortment of these plants. "We sell all year round, but we are especially busy during the holidays," Lenat added. With the work force of twenty-five full and parttime employees, Far-Out Cactus propagates from seed and cuttings "a few hundred varieties," the manager said.

Due to the confusion that results from common names the cacti are identified only by their botanical names. Rather than marketing individual varieties, much of the ordering for the chain stores is done as groupings or planters of several varieties in one container.

"We decide which plants to put together to fill the orders. If they sell, then the buyer will reorder. We sell assortments which offer a variety of color, texture and form," Lenat explained. "If our assortments don't sell, then the stores don't reorder."

Super markets and department stores often offer or advertise the cactus assortments as special drawing factors for the store. The resulting volume of sales make the prices being paid for these assortments as cheap as they have ever been for the general public, Lenat added.



There are many varieties of cactus. Here are some of the older plants which are on display at the greenhouses. Smaller plants are sold year round.



Pictured here are some of the assortment packages of cactus which are often seen in supermarkets and variety stores.

Homestead

Notes



Small cacti grow in individual divisions of flats for about a year before they are ready to be sent out to the general public. Plants are sent throughout the Eastern U.S. and Canada.

The popularity of the cactus plant in recent years has reflected the overall trend toward using more plants in homes, especially apartments, Lenat surmised. A few years ago, Cacti were eccentric plants to some extent, but now are much more a popular choice.

The major reason for the rise in popularity of the cactus, however, according to Lenat, is its reputation for being able to withstand treatments of all types and downright neglect. Although they can adapt and survive in extreme conditions, cacti actually have specific growing requirements of temperature, sunlight and moisture as well as nutrients to thrive and become a viable agricultural business. "The general public does not have to be very particular with the cactus but the grower has certain requirements to meet," Lenat said. "Care is most critical during the first year of growth - when we have the cactus," he explained. "There are less diverse requirements after that time, they can withstand all extremes of care and neglect after that first year."

Cacti would do well with from a few hours to a full day of direct sunlight, according to the manager. Less sun means less growth. They need frequent watering, especially during the growing seasons of Spring, Summer and Fall. The soil should be very porous and be allowed to dry out slightly between waterings during this rapid growth period. In the Winter when growth is slower, they should be allowed to dry longer between watering. "Even if they are left dry for a long time they will not suffer greatly, but it will affect their rate of growth," Lenat stated.

A rule of thumb to follow, Lenat said, is to water in direct proportion to the amount of sunlight the cactus receives.

Outgrowing the "soil" or growing medium is a rare problem Lenat added. Transplanting need only be done when the plant size in relation to the pot size appears ridiculous. Cactus grows well in a small amount of growing medium with very little root growth room needed.

Regular feeding during the growing season of any commercial plant food will supply the necessary nutrients.

What many people erroneously call cactus is actually a succulent, Lenat pointed out. The difference between the two is anatomical or scientifically determined. Basic differences apparent to the general public are that succulents have fleshy leaves without true spines (the needlelike projections). Cacti are leafless, utilize nutrients in the photosynthesis process in the stems rather than leaves and have spines.

After a dormant season, Winter, cacti flower in early Spring with a variety of colors and shapes. Seeds are collected from the mature flowers and broadcast on a growing medium in flats and germinate within a few weeks depending on the variety. After germination and some initial growth, the individual plants are transplanted into individually divided flats for continued cultivation.

One large greenhouse is used for the seedlings with a daytime temperature around 60 degrees F. and kept cooler at night. After sufficient growth has occurred and the critical period of usually a year's time has passed, the flats are moved to the production greenhouse where they are planted in assortment packs, packaged and shipped out in trucks which are equipped to provide the proper temperature.

The hundreds of sizes, shapes and colors of the cacti in the greenhouses have resulted from buying and experimenting for several years with these plants. If they thrive and are marketable, then they are grown in greater number, Lenat stated.

Reflecting the enthusiasm of any young farmer one happens to meet, whether he raises cows or apples, Lenat is constantly busy with daily chores including the watering of the plants, meeting weather problems such as cold drafts seeping into the greenhouse at one end, handling employee management and paying close attention to marketing trends. Whether it's cows or cacti - it is still farming.