

# Time to get those seeds ordered

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Now is the time when serious gardeners are busy studying their seed catalogues selecting which delicious vegetables will grace tables next summer. It is also the time for writing our orders and sending them to their favorite distributors.

In Lancaster County, P. L. Rohrer & Bro., Inc. has long been symbolic of the very finest in seeds, and at this time of the year, their garden seed operation is in full swing.

Seven people are now employed in the garden department, weighing, packaging and displaying the seeds on the shelves in the store. An innovation this year will be self-service in an extensively re-designed retail store. Garden seed Manager Clarence Rohrer says he hopes the new concept will meet with customer approval.

In 1980 Rohrer sold over 80,000 pounds of garden seeds, and Rohrer says, "We are the biggest seed house locally. No one else buys the volume of seed from the suppliers that we do."

Garden seed sales have increased dramatically in the last few years, after having dropped "way back," according to Rohrer. He says, "It's an economy thing. Last year they referred to them as 'survival gardens.'" He said the only year that surpassed last year in volume was during World War II when victory gardens were popular.

Mail orders, which account for 20 percent of the total volume of business, are just beginning to come in. When 200 are accumulated they will begin mailing the seeds as far away as the Midwest, Idaho and California. Most of the mail orders are repeat customers. Rohrer says, "When I go over the orders the names are

so familiar." He added that mail orders increased for the first time last year after "hanging dropping" previously.

Direct sales to about 125 dealers account for an additional 45 percent of Rohrer's seed business and the remainder of the seeds are sold from the familiar Smoketown store.

The largest volume of business in the seed department comes in March. Rohrer says, "We give advice all day long. We have capable clerks who can answer all the questions." After the rush, the department will go back to having just two fulltime employees.

A large part of their wholesale seeds come from Ferry Morse in California which supplies the "fine" seeds, and from Roger Brothers in Idaho, which supplies peas, beans and corn. A salesman from Ferry Morse recently told Rohrer that P.L. Rohrer has been buying from them for over 50 years.

As the man in charge of ordering seeds to sell, Rohrer must be something of a clairvoyant to determine just which kind and how many seeds he will need. Contract orders for 1982 seeds will be signed by the end of April. Rohrer makes light of any special predicting ability on his part saying, "I just check my records and my inventory lists to determine what I need. It's really a guessing game for the growers who must translate orders into the number of acres they need to plant."

There are many favorites which are big sellers year after year. The biggest seller in the business is sweet corn, and Silver Queen is the undisputed leader in sweet corn. White corn has always been popular in this county, and Rohrer recalls when farmers were accused of selling early field corn if they tried to sell yellow corn at market. He even recalls signs



P.L. Rohrer's new store at Smoketown will offer the convenience of self-service for this year's customers.

## Homestead Notes

prohibiting the sale of yellow corn.

Hybrids changed that attitude to the extent that Rohrer says, "We sold mostly yellow corn for years." Now he declares that Silver Queen is the unchallenged leader, adding, "I hardly sell any Evergreen anymore."

In green beans the leader is Tendergreen, with other stringless types selling well.

Another leading seller for Rohrer is sugar peas. Rohrer said, "For years sugar peas were a local thing. They could be found only in Lancaster and Berks County. Now you can go into the finest restaurant anywhere and eat them but you don't ask for sugar peas, you ask for snow peas. I presume the Pennsylvania Dutch Reformed brought the seed with them from

the old country." Rohrer's now sell about 4,000 pounds of sugar peas.

A newcomer in the field is the sugar snap pea, available only for the past two years. It has quickly become a favorite because of its versatility. "People like it because they can eat it mature or immature. There are so many recipes for sugar snap peas," Rohrer says.

Will they overtake the market for sugar peas? "Not as long as they grow six to eight feet tall," Rohrer replies. "If growers can get them to 30 inches then it may change."

Rohrer compares the sugar snap pea to a hull pea, although growers like to call them a totally new vegetable, Rohrer says they are like the "sickle pea" he remembers from his youth.

For sugar snap pea fans, however, this year will be a slim one. Rohrer states, "There was almost a total crop failure. They were ready to harvest them in Idaho and they had two weeks of rain followed by sleet and up to six inches of snow."

Other tastes of his customers have changed through the years. Rohrer notes that more greens are being sold now, and items like mustard greens, collards and okra have been added in just the last few years.

Herbs are also getting to be popular time in his business. "Last year was the first year I carried herbs," Rohrer says.

Of course, there are always new products to be selected, Rohrer said he relies upon his seed suppliers, periodicals and the All-American Selection Committee for recommendations about new items. Usually he limits new seeds to no more than two or three per year.

Rohrer has seen many changes since he began with the business at age 19 in 1935. "Hybrids came out for vegetables of all kinds. This made the biggest difference. It offers better yield, better quality and more disease resistance." Some vegetables like peas and beans cannot be hybridized. Hybrids also cost more.

Customers come largely from rural and suburban areas, and Rohrer says with a smile that he is now serving people whose fathers he sold seeds to many years ago.

P.L. Rohrer, Clarence's father, started the seed business in 1914, after purchasing it from Glick's nursery where he had worked for several years. Two years later his brother J. L. joined him, forming the partnership P.L. Rohrer and Brother. The operation was run strictly as a seed house for years and years, according to Rohrer.

It is presently owned by a corporation composed of descendants of P.L. Rohrer. Clarence is secretary of the corporation. From the seed business it has expanded to bulk spreading, seed cleaning, and the retail store has now expanded from seeds and chemicals to a fairly complete line of garden supplies.

Rohrer says, "It's a one stop thing. They can get all the items they need at one time." The expanded line includes such things as flower pots and tree wraps.

Rohrer recalls when it was convenient for farmers to come for their farm seeds and bring their wife's garden seed order along.

Another change over the years is that almost all of Rohrer's needs are trucked to their Smoketown location. Rohrer remembers when he and his brothers would go to Bird-in-Hand and open up freight cars. "We used to unload four or five trainloads a week," he states. There were also occasional trips to the Philadelphia docks to unload rye grass seed. But trains went out, he said, when trucking

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Gary Bender demonstrates a machine which assists in the packaging of the large volume of seeds.



Dealer sales represent 45 percent of the total of Rohrer's business, and here Don Chevront writes tags which will direct seeds to the proper dealer.



Garden Seed Manager Clarence Rohrer fills an order in the redesigned retail store which now offers customers self-service.