

Washington Boro couple raises flowers, says quality is key to success

BY SUZANNE KEENE

WASHINGTON BORO — When Brian and Paula McCreight became the parents of a son three years ago, Paula was working full time as a biologist at Muddy Run Ecological Laboratories. For a while, she took their new son, Owen, along to work, making a bed for him in the laboratory. But, as he got older and more active, it was no longer feasible to take him along, and Paula decided she did not like the idea of leaving him behind.

"I didn't really like the idea of going to work without him," she said.

Dissatisfied with her employment situation, Paula said her interest was aroused when a friend who was working as a florist suggested that she might be able to raise flowers on a commercial basis and market them to local florists. Paula and Brian were already living on a farm, raising a few steers and crops in addition to holding down their full-time jobs.

Paula and the florist went through the seed catalogues, selecting those flowers they thought would hold well as cut flowers and which the florists would be able to use. Paula also did

some research on which flowers would grow well in Pennsylvania.

Last year, they planted three acres of their farm in a variety of flowers. Through trial and error, they have found that some types work better as cut flowers than others. Sometimes, Paula said, the catalogue is right when it says a flower keeps well, and sometimes it isn't.

Paula and Brian said they start some of their seeds in a local greenhouse and transplant them to bigger flats as they grow. However, most of them they start in seed beds, which are prepared like tobacco beds, Paula explained. Later, the plants are transplanted into the regular beds using a tobacco planter.

Despite the drought that plagued Lancaster County last summer, the McCreights were successful in their new business. Paula said the florists were surprised at the quantity of quality flowers they produced without an irrigation system.

Looking back, Brian and Paula say they consider themselves lucky to have done so well. They attribute their success to the good soil and water on their farm.

Brian adds: "A dry year will



Brian McCreight takes down a lath of flowers that have been hanging in the barn to dry. Brian said they sell most of their dried flowers in the winter.

scare you to death, but a wet year will kill you."

At the end of last year's season, the McCreights added a pond to their land and installed a drip irrigation system. However, this season has been so wet that they haven't had to use it much.

Last year, Paula sold the flowers, fresh from the fields, to florists in the Lancaster area. Transporting them in a small station wagon, she said she sometimes had to make several trips into the city before she sold them all.

To show the florists that she was really serious about the business, she ordered catalogues showing which varieties of flowers she had to offer. With fresh flowers and catalogues in hand, she entered local flower shops, introducing herself as a new grower and showing her wares.

"Some people were apprehensive, but overall they were willing to try," she remarked.

Paula notes that in the flower business, they are competing in a world market, with many of the flowers used in the United States coming from Holland and South America. But because they can offer a fresh, top-quality product, the McCreights have been able to hold their own against the competition.

Having a much shorter distance to transport their product, the McCreights are able to offer fresher flowers than florists can get from other countries. To keep their flowers at their best, Brian and Paula put them in water as

soon as they are picked. Before storing the flowers in their walk-in refrigerator, they let them stand in the water for two full hours, allowing them to "drink." Then, still in water, they are stored in the cooler.

Offering flowers that have not been out of water gives the Mc-

Creights an advantage over foreign growers who have to ship their flowers dry packed. "That's one of the main reasons we have been able to do what we've done," Paula says.

To maintain the quality of flower that they market, Brian and Paula

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Sok Tuy (left) and Victoria Patterson, who work part-time for the McCreights, bundle liatris to fill a wholesale order. Others will be hung in the barn to dry.



Brian moves buckets of flowers from his refrigerated truck onto the wholesaler's truck. By keeping the flowers in water from the time they are picked, the McCreights are able to offer top quality cut flowers.



Brian and Paula work together to harvest some bright pink gladiolas from their flower beds. They said harvesting and weeding are the most time consuming part of raising flowers.



Paula McCreight harvests some static from a row in their six acres of flowers. Currently, they have about 4,000 static plants.