

Little Valley Farm Blooms Profits

BY LOU ANN GOOD

LITITZ — Four years ago when avian flu wiped out John Miller's 10,000 chickens, he was hesitant to risk repopulating his poultry operation. To continue supporting his family on their 60-acre farm, John needed a new income-producing product.

As he contemplated various job opportunities, Linda, his wife, envisioned launching their own dried flower business on their Little Valley Farm in Lititz. John was not convinced. Drying flowers seemed like a far-out business venture to him.

Linda persisted. Dubiously, John planted an acre of flowers like statice and globe amarantha. "We rented outside space at Root's Country Market in Manheim," Linda recalled. "And," she paused as she exchanged a laughing glance with her husband, "we'll never forget that first day. All morning, we sat in the house and watched it rain. But in the afternoon the sky cleared. For awhile, we debated whether or not we should bother to go, but finally we packed up the flower arrangements and went to the market."

John said, "Within four hours, everything was sold! That first day at Root's convinced me that Linda was right. We should go into the dried flower business."

The booming success of their business continued, but not with-

out hard work, long hours and planning. Through trial and error the Millers learned the maturity flowers need to be picked for drying. They dry all their flowers by hanging them upside down in a dark, dry area. John emphasized, "They must be kept dry because mold changes the color."

Weekly, for 1½ years, the Millers continued to take their product to Roots. They moved from an outside stand to an inside one. By then, the Millers had branched out into other methods of selling both retail and wholesale. Linda said, "We soon learned the dried flowers sell even better at arts and craft shows." So they dropped their weekly excursions to Root's Market and concentrated on choosing shows that produced the most profit.

"Every year," Linda said, "The shows get better and better." She added, "We prefer to enter juried shows that require slides and pictures to screen registrants." Those shows produce more buyers.

This year the Millers participated in 16 shows which took them to Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey and throughout Pennsylvania.

"Although we'd like to go to more shows, that's all we have time to do," John explained, "because it takes a lot of preparation."

"We love the shows," Linda



Within four years, John and Linda Miller have watched their dried flower service bloom into a booming business.

said. "We enjoy meeting the people. It takes a lot of work and we come home dead tired on our feet, but it is worth it."

Behind the glamour of successful shows, looms much hard work and planning. John said that they need to plan three years in advance for perennials since they seldom produce blooms before that time.

Then, there are the weeds to contend with. John, Linda, one full-time and several part-time employees find that they work best by doing everything together. So together they tackle the weeds by hoeing.

The second year, the Millers planted eight acres of flower seeds, but they couldn't keep after the required work and they found local labor was too high to make it profitable. Since then they plant five acres of flowers annually, and to increase their stock, they import roses and statice fresh from South American and then dry it. They also buy direct from a New Jersey grower.

For the Millers, it is a family business. Their three oldest children Chad, 9; Nita, 7; Katy, 3, help pick and weed the flowers. Linda said, "Actually, they do a better job picking than most of our employees. Because they grew up with it, they just seem to know how mature a bloom should be for picking."

The children like to assist their parents when they attend shows. They help fill the stands with flowers that have been transported by the three trailers their parents own.

Their older children help entertain the baby and Linda said, "I couldn't do it without John's help. He pitches in with the cooking and cleaning."

"But," John interjected, "I only

do the basic steps in flower arranging, Linda adds the final touch to flower arrangements."

Linda's parents own Kreider's Mum Farm which retails to flower shops and businesses. On the side they also grow flowers to dry. Although Linda had studied floriculture in school and then worked several years as a floral arranger, she said her unique flower arranging ideas "come from God."

She admits that she is very particular with her designing. She said, "It's hard to find someone who is really good at flower arranging."

For containers, they buy baskets and pottery in bulk. In addition to designing arrangements that Linda said are all unique, the Millers put together eight varieties of mixed bouquets which they repeatedly use. "They're something everyone can afford to buy," Linda explained.

It is a year-round operation. And Linda said, "I like the variety it offers. In the spring there is the excitement of anticipating a good year. I'm eager to try new things and curious to see how the flowers will dry."

The summer season dictates picking and hoeing the colorful blooms. "It's more of an incentive to keep the flower beds clean when you can actually see the results," John said. During the winter months, they arrange flowers from their stock.

The arts and crafts shows are interspersed throughout the year. Some of the bouquets are not as easy to make, "but," Linda said, "when you see the customers'

faces light up when they buy them, it makes all the hard work worthwhile."

Depending where the show is located, the Millers adjust the type of arrangements they show. "The wealthier areas like the newer color trends," Linda said. Regardless of where they sell, "We don't hear people complain that our prices are too high.

People often remarked, 'Do you know how much I'd need to pay for this if I bought it in flower shop?'"

The Millers admit that to keep on top of everything they spent "too many hours" in the business. Every aspect of the work requires hand labor. Linda said, "When we're tired, we work anyway." And sometimes that means from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.

John said, "The business has actually outgrown us." They do not desire to get bigger since they feel there are too many negative aspects to operating a larger business.

It is a lot of hard work, but the Millers now have a prospering wholesale and retail business. "It offers us a nice living," John admitted.

Linda added, "Everything happened by word-of-mouth. We never did any advertising."

Little Valley Farm keeps blooming profits. Its entrepreneur owners aren't complaining. They believe the avian flu turned out to be a blessing in disguise for them. "It's more money than chickens and we like it better," they both claim.



With a baby and three other children, Linda often arranges flowers while "mothering."



Summer and fall seasons find the Millers picking blooms from their five acres of flowers. Left to right, Nancy Stoltzfus, full-time employee, John and Linda Miller.

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