

Blooming Business For The Jolly Green Giant

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YORK — They're already in the thick of the harvest season at Stambaugh's Greenhouses.

In fact, the first "pickings" from this crop were loaded for market before Easter. Flats filled with beautifully-blooming geraniums headed south to retail outlets, from this hillside greenhouse complex at 3905 Susquehanna Trail, York.

That first shipment of the season barely made the proverbial dent in some 80,000 geranium plants grown annually by Leona and Ellsworth Gemmill for wholesaling to retail garden centers. Geraniums produced on this family farm operation add cheerful summertime color to thousands of gardens in the mid-Atlantic area.

Stambaugh's Greenhouses opened for business during Easter season of 1945, though founder W.R. "Bill" Stambaugh had not originally intended to be in the potted plant business at all.

Stambaugh acquired his first greenhouse for the purpose of drying gladioli bulbs. Then a brakeman at the Pennsylvania Railroad's Enola yards, he and his wife grew a few acres of glads for the cut flower market as a sideline.

Problems with drying down the bulbs in the fall for winter storage set him searching for a greenhouse for that purpose. A glad-growing friend with a greenhouse was giving up his business; Stambaugh made an offer that promptly made him new owner of the glass structure. After tearing it down, moving the components and rebuilding it at the farm north of York, Stambaugh figured the investment was going to have to generate more return than mere bulb drying space.

With World War II winding down and a nation hungry for a more uplifting mood, he saw the potential demand for flowers. Though potted flowers were a bit scarce, he was able through a friend to locate a supply of seasonal blooming plants just in time for Easter.

An "open" sign went up out

front, customers liked what they found, returned, sent others, and the business was launched. That sign was the only advertising ever done by this unassuming, but highly successful, family operation.

Now, 45 years later, Stambaugh's daughter and son-in-law have just officially taken over reins of the greenhouse operation. And, on some occasions, four generations of this family work together to plant and harvest its beautiful crops. Daughter Virginia Baker works full time with the family, and 12-year-old granddaughter Jamie occasionally lends a hand on days off from school.

During the early years, Stambaugh grew and retailed a wide range of bedding annuals, garden vegetable plants, seasonal bulbs and holiday plants, even Christmas trees. The first of many expansions of additional greenhouses came only two years after the "open" sign went up.

"We didn't know where we were going," relates the affable Bill Stambaugh. "We just started and went the way things went."

Wholesaling was eventually the way things went, as Stambaugh's market sense recognized possibilities in the surging building and economic boom bursting behind the lean war years.

"There was an opportunity for someone to grow geraniums; there has always been more demand than supply for them," he relates.

And, it is primarily around geraniums that the business was built and continues to thrive. Approximately ten varieties of assorted colors comprise the annual crop, some of them long-time, proven performers, along with newer, promising types. Color trends are also considered, though red continues to be the first choice for many gardeners.

Stambaugh's Greenhouses grows no geraniums from seed, preferring the larger size, as well as the fuller and more rapid bloom of cutting-grown plants. Cutting geraniums are reportedly the second high in volume of bedding plants sold nationwide, despite



Three generations working together at Stambaugh's Greenhouses include, from left, Virginia Baker, Leona and Ellsworth Gemmill, and Bill Stambaugh.



Newest variety of geranium grown at Stambaugh's is "Aurora," a deep fuschia shade.

predictions at one time that the seed types would replace the popularity of their cutting-grown cousins. According to Stambaugh, the blooms on seed-grown geraniums shatter more quickly than those produced by cutting-grown plants.

First cuttings are taken from the large mother plants in mid-October, and tucked into sterilized soil in small pots, 35 to a flat. Flats go onto a "hot rack," in the upper levels of the houses, with automatic watering and bottom heat to encourage rooting and cut rotting losses. After about three weeks, the batch is moved to the waist-high benches which stretch wall-to-wall through the houses.

Successive crops of cuttings follow at regular intervals, while batches of the rooted geraniums get their final transplant into four-inch pots. Plants develop from cuttings to full market size, complete with fluffy blooms, in five months. The last cuttings, taken in early February, mature to wrap-up the season by Independence Day.

Largest volumes of the geraniums go to wholesale customers

around the metropolitan areas of Baltimore and Washington, D.C. While housing expansion has cramped most other types of agriculture enterprises in the region, it has proven a boon for flower and garden plant growers.

"The interest in plants is growing," confirms a pleased Stambaugh, who still handles deliveries for the operation. "Look at all the housing developments; when one neighbor plants flowers, the other neighbors plant flowers, too. People have more money to spend on making their properties attractive. We've felt the dips in the economy over the years, but we've always sold out."

Quality plays a large role in that, a sense of pride that is evident in the attitude of this friendly family. Quality takes precedence over quantity, and all three generations fret when uncontrollables, like last summer's extreme heat, affects plants' performance.

"I enjoy so much getting these ready, especially when they're nice," smiles Leona Gemmill, as she fills an order from a bench thick with crisp green leaves and apple-blossom-pink blooms.

The needs and market timing for two additional popular floral crops mesh well into the geranium culture schedule and conditions. Hanging baskets of fuschia, a favorite Mother's Day gift, provide a harvest from the upper levels of the greenhouses. They thrive several feet above the long rows of benches, bringing economic return in space where stocky geraniums never reach.

Even the 2,500 hanging baskets of fuschias now filling out and pushing buds fall short of customer demand for these lovely specimen plants. Cuttings taken from stock plants grow full and bushy

with two pinchings to encourage branching.

Fuschias are sensitive to adverse soil moisture conditions and require frequent checks to guard against either over or under watering. Their location, some six feet or so overhead in the greenhouses, has led to Ellsworth Gemmill's skill on stilts.

Endless climbing on and moving ladders to monitor the fuschias' moisture proved burdensome. So, some years ago, using the concept of plasterers' stilts, Gemmill devised an experimental pair of high-rise footgear to raise him to eye level with the hanging baskets. Having conquered that skill, he now straps on a pair of commercial plasterers' stilts to monitor and water the long rows of fuschias soaking up sun from their heady height.

And, as the final cuttings of geraniums and fuschias are just nicely filling pots with healthy roots, the annual shipment of rooted poinsettia cuttings arrived in late March from California. First planted to four-inch pots, then moved to the eight-inch size, those become stock plants for the crop of consumers' favorite Christmas plants.

Initial poinsettia cuttings are made about the same time the last geraniums go out, keeping the 30,000 square feet of greenhouse space in year-round use.

"It's never ending; someone has to be here all the time," says Leona of the rotation of these popular plant crops.

On bright, sunny days, the plants need daily watering. Plants are fed every 10 to 14 days. A planned addition of automatic watering equipment, with built-in fertilization capabilities, will ease the physical labor of watering by hand with hoses.

Stambaugh's was one of the first greenhouse operations in the area many years ago to convert from costly glass structures to the quonset-style, plastic-covered style house. They were still such an innovative idea at that time that no building packages were on the



Expanses of blooms in shades of reds, pinks and fuschias fill the benches at Stambaugh's Greenhouses.



Geranium cuttings are taken from the shoots of large "mother" stock plants, like this one held by Leona Gemmill.

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