

Blooming Business

(Continued from Page B2)

market. Stambaugh opted to build his own.

Water pipes were used for the superstructure over which the plastic is stretched. But, no device for bending the heavy pipe was available, so again, Stambaugh did some inventing. The first pipe bender, of wood, split under the pressure of bending the pipe. A steel, motorized, revised design proved more durable.

All but two of the Stambaugh's dozen greenhouses are of plastic in quonset style. Modern materials are a vast improvement over early sheeting plastics, which aged rapidly to brittleness, and lasted a year at most. These improved plastics are so durable that they only need replaced every three

years.

"One of our biggest worries was always over whether the plastic would hold. Sometimes during bad storms, we'd be out patching seams," Stambaugh remembers. And, Leona recalls a day she was working in a greenhouse when suddenly the plastic simply popped, like a balloon.

Several houses get new plastic each year, in three year rotations, in a procedure which involves hauling a single cut-to-size piece, across the top of the metal pipe ribbing with ropes, and fastening tightly all around. A house can be completely recovered in about two hours, barring such problems as wind interference. After years of experience, this family recovers greenhouses early in the morning,

since winds generally stay calm until about 9 a.m.

Temperature weighs heavily in greenhouse growing conditions, and there are backups all around for the hot water heating system used in this complex. Coal fuels the main system, with an oil-fired backup, and a stand-by generator for electrical outtages.

"We would be done if we lost our heat," flatly states Leona Gemmill.

Stambaugh remembers a few close calls over the years. One cold, snowy morning he stepped into a greenhouse filled with cold air. But not a plant was lost to the heating failure, since the snow cover acted as an insulator. On another occasion, a storm knocked

power out all around the Stambaughs, while their current was never interrupted.

"The Man upstairs takes care of that," quickly credits Stambaugh.

The hardiness of geraniums allows a tolerance to a range of temperatures; and few pests, save an occasional infestation of white fly, bother them.

"Geraniums need lots of sunlight or their leaves will turn yellow," advises Gemmill. "They need water when it gets hot and dry during the summer. You can't hurt a geranium by letting it get too dry; more are lost by overwatering."

Geranium buyers should look

for short, "stalky" plants, advise these experts. And, the more "breaks," or side shoots, and the lower they are on the plant, the better, for compact bushiness and plenty of blooms.

Although they have considered retailing, Stambaugh and the Gemmills have chosen to remain wholesale growers, concentrating on the quality of their crop and leaving the retail end to those specialists.

"When you produce a good crop, it just makes you feel good about it," Stambaugh reflects. "We never get tired of it."

Or as Leona Gemmill sums it up — no pun intended — "It's a business that just grows on you."

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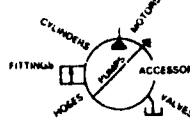
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