

Floral Crop Ready For Easter Harvest

JOYCE BUYP

York Co. Correspondent

YORK (York Co.) — While area field crop producers are gearing up for the spring planting season, Joe Hoffman is overseeing last minute details of the harvest.

Hoffman's crop is a fragrant and colorful one, a sprintime array of lilies, hyacinths, daffodills, and chrysanthemums. The Easter potted plant crop is the first of several seasonal harvests taken annually from the 40,000 square feet of glass and plastic greenhouses at Aug. H. Schaefer Flowers, 145 North Albemarle Street.

As lilies and hyacinths waft their perfume through the airy, warm greenhouse environment, dozens of other sorts of plants in various stages of growth fill bench and floor space and cascade from overhead. Employees are busy planting tiny seedlings to market packs, blooming size plants get repotted into larger, specimen containers, and pastel buds are beginning to peek out from beneath the graceful foliage of hanging baskets.

Christmas poinsettia cuttings will arrive shortly, even before space is vacated by flats of bedding flowers and vegetable plants. And before the Memorial Day weekend rush for colorful geraniums, Joe Hoffman is looking ahead to ordering Easter bulbs for 1995.

"We work 10 monthys to a year ahead in planning and ordering," says Hoffman, from his office haven in a secluded corner between the busy greenhouses and the retail shop.

Joe Hoffman grew up on a northern York County general livestock and crops farm near Dover. As a young man, he decided he preferred a career away from the long hours and hard work of agriculture, and earned a degree in mechanical engineering. But after many years working at that field in the corporate world, Hoffman felt it was again time for a change of direction.

"I needed a new set of problems," he quietly chuckles, adding, "I had no illusions that going into business for myself would be easy or take less time."

After one particularly frustrating day in his mechanical engineering position, he called the owner of Aug. H. Schaefer Flowers, which he had learned might be for sale. A few months later, in July 1981, Joe Hoffman was in the greenhouse-florist business.

It was a major career direction change for a man who says with a grin that he barely knew the difference between a marigold and a geranium. But Hoffman had spent an intense few months researching the operation with the owner and accountants, and believed it to be a viable business venture for him to undertake. In addition, the previous owner was eager to teach Hoffman the greenhouse business.

While there was much for him to learn, absorb, and digest about the floral cultivation and retailing business, he recalls not worrying too much originally about success or failure in his new venture.

"I didn't know enough to worry," he jokes. "After a few years of experience, I knew enough to wor-



Aug. H. Schaefer employees Helen Hyder, left, and Elsie Winter transplant impatiens seedlings.

ry. But you reach a point where you quit worrying and concentrate on what can be addressed."

Instead, Hoffman directs his energies into planning and paying attention to details he can manage and control. Months ahead of each planting or holiday season, he will have scheduled down almost to the last pot or pack just how many bulbs, how many varieties, how many different colors of each particular plant will be marketed.

One crop factor he shares with all growers - no control over the weather.

"But weather is not really that big a factor, because we grow inside. You do have to make allowances for the changeableness of temperatures, but that can be handled with ventilation. And we don't have to rely on rain," he explains.

Most critical weather uncontrollable is sunshine. Shading materials are used as needed to avoid burning and overheating plants in hot, bright weather. Sunshine, or the lack of it, impacts the watering needs of the plants and blooming schedules, especially critical to holiday plants that need to be at peak bloom within a few-day customer demand period.

"Two days after Easter, those potted bulb plants are virtually worthless," says Hoffman of the tiny "sales window" for which seasonal floral growers and retailers must aim.

Hoffman feels this year's extreme winter cold had a minimal effect on greenhouse operations, though causing what he estimates was a ten-percent increase in heating costs. Although he had



Joe Hoffman checks the progress of hanging baskets, being grown for the busiest "flower" holiday of the year, Mother's Day.

no weather-related damages to facilities, many producers did have greenhouses collapse under the weight of heavy snow and ice.

Like any successful marketing business, customers demand is what drives the final production decisions in this retail-oriented and service company.

"I track plant trends by our sales here," Hoffman says of letting the customers be the ultimate determining factor in choice of color and varieties are grown. "If the industry says the trend is to pink geraniums and our customers are buying red ones — we grow red ones."

Voluminous notes he keeps help Hoffman track the successes and less-in-demand plants from each major retailing season. That comprises the data bank of information he reviews when planning an ordering for the next year's seasonal crop and producing to meet changing trends in the gardening and floral industry.

"Customers are buying more easy-care plants, like impatiens instead of petunias, because they take less ongoing care. And we used to grow lots of materials for customers to plant hanging baskets; now they prefer buying them already planted," observes Hoffman.

He also sees a continuing decline in demand for vegetable plants. Customers who do plant vegetables, he says, are planting fewer of them, but starting with larger, well-started plants rather than small transplants.

Transportation plays a large role in the changing greenhouse

business, Hoffman believes. Both food and cut flowers can more readily be shipped from distant areas where climate conditions makes their production easier and more cost-effective.

When the Schaefer firm went into business in 1903, the flowers used for the arrangements designed and sold by the retail shop were grown on-site. Now, with improved more-durable varieties, refrigerated shipping and hours-away air transportation, flowers grown all over the world go into the designs delivered by the Schaefer delivery vans.

South American counties are major suppliers of cut floral materials for the United States, along with Mexico and Hawaii. Israel has great potential, Hoffman says, to become a major cut flower source, limited only by water supplies. While many varieties are also grown domestically in warmer southern states, Hoffman estimates that volume to be only half of what it once was.

"Cut flowers are a stable, predictable market," relates Hoffman, with demand peaking during such flower-oriented holidays as Valentine's or Mothers' Day. But even cut flower buying trends are changing, as fresh bouquets become more available at supermarkets and convenience stores.

"Floral shops are a service industry; we offer buyers a service," Hoffman emphasizes. "We deliver, we make something special the customer can't get somewhere else. The greenhouses are really a separate business. There,

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Roxanne Vadermark, floral designer at the Aug. H. Schaefer retail shop, tucks some final greenery into an arrangement of colorful, fresh flowers.



Chrysanthemums are one of the most popular Easter — season flowers at the Aug. H. Schaefer florist business. This greenhouse full of these customer favorites will offer buyers a variety of color and size selection.

Homestead Notes