

Temple Greenhouses: Already Primed For Poinsettias

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TEMPLE (Berks Co.) — For the moment, forget the cliché. Again, one man's misfortune has turned into another's bountiful luck.

In 1956, a terrible hailstorm destroyed the small greenhouse operation in Temple owned by James MacLatchie. Within 10 minutes, the business was completely wiped out. However, in June of 1960, one year before the Berlin Wall was built, and fleeing the communists who were turning greenhouses in East Germany into collectives, the new owners of the site, Gunther Wolter and his family, came to America and eventually settled in Temple. There, they rebuilt on the site where the hailstorm wreaked havoc — and where the business now prospers with Gunther's son, Dieter, and Dieter's family.

Experience in the greenhouse business goes way back, to 1888, for the Wolter family. Dieter's great-grandfather, Emil Wolter, was an apprentice in the greenhouse industry in Mecklenburg, a German state. Journeymen such as Emil had to travel and work for other greenhouses — he went as far south as Greece and over to Turkey. Eventually he married and settled in Fehrbellin, Germany.

In 1919, Dieter's grandfather Emil Karl Wolter went to work with his father. He also apprenticed for a time. The business flourished. Then, in 1920, Dieter's father, Gunther, was born.

Years later Gunther passed his journeyman studies and worked in other greenhouses in Angermünde, Halberstadt, and Bremen. After serving in the army, he married Annelis Wolter (nee Mueller).

Annelis's family worked in the greenhouse business and she studied "Blumenbinder" — floral design.

In 1946, Dieter was born. In 1947, Dieter's father, Gunther, made his "Meister" examination and in 1948 took over the family greenhouse. Greenhouses were added. In 1955, a major renovation and modernization was started. The new greenhouses included major crops such as Cyclamen, carnation, freesia, and other blooming plants, shipped all over East Germany.

But it began to fall apart, because Gunther didn't believe in what the East German regime was doing. The government began to

take over and form collectives. Gunther knew the greenhouse industry was next. If you weren't a communist, you were in trouble.

So, on June 5, 1960, Gunther and family fled East Germany. They stayed in West Berlin. In December, the family arrived in New York and moved to Staten Island. Gunther took a job as a cook's helper in Moravian College and Annelis worked as a "salad girl." Dieter went into the 9th grade in Curtis High School. The years, Dieter recalled, were rough, because of the difficulty of learning the English language.

The family kept one goal in mind: return to the greenhouse business. Gunther came across the greenhouse for sale in Temple.

So, on March 3, 1963, he began the business and the family moved to Temple.

Eventually, in March 1977, Dieter and wife Sheila took over the Temple Greenhouse business and, in the years since, added land and remodeled the buildings.

Dieter and Sheila Wolter manage Temple Greenhouses with son Karl, 23, and daughter Erika, 26. In all, about 30,000 square feet are under greenhouse cover and house two seasons worth of flowers and greenery: the spring bedding and vegetable plant season, in addition to flowers, and the Christmas season, including a booming poinsettia business. Included is a gift shop with silk flowers.

The retail store also handles about 90 different herbs, about 100 different varieties of perennials, 26 different varieties of petunias (including the new Purple Wave), and 17 different varieties of tomatoes. There are also about 20 varieties of peppers and a wide array of vegetable and other plants. About 95 percent of the spring crops are retail, the rest wholesale.

In preparation for the holiday season, "almost everything is full of poinsettias," noted Dieter. In all, about 20,000 poinsettia plants are made ready for the season. They include about a dozen different varieties, including four reds (the most popular varieties), three whites, three pinks, and speckled and stripes. The plants range from one to nine per pot, and can grow from 3 inches to 12 inches in height. Some plants can spread to two feet. About 60 percent of the poinsettia crop is retail and the rest are sold to flower shops and other businesses.

Wolter spoke about the chal-



Karl Wolter holds up a hanging basket of the popular Purple Wave petunias at Temple Greenhouses. Experience in the greenhouse business goes way back, to 1888, for the Wolter family.

lenges of maintaining the 20,000 poinsettias for a small market while competing against the K-Mart, Hechingers, and Lowes.

A week after Easter, the planting stock arrives from California. The cuttings are placed in a four-inch pot and then transferred to a larger pot. Around mid-July, cuttings begin for the Christmas market. The cuttings are placed in "oasis" cubes and are grown, about 15-20 cuttings per pot, depending on variety and pot size.

A strict regimen is followed to ensure the health and vitality of the cuttings. The house is heated properly to ensure good root growth. Work on the cuttings, done by hand, begins at 4:30 in the morning until noon every day. Four batches are performed: one begins in mid-July, another the first week in August, another the third week in August, and the last the first week of September.

Depending on which cultivar is used, special heating and other requirements are necessary. In July, even during the regular summer heat, night temperatures must be kept constant. In the daytime, cooling must occur with fans and ventilators to ensure proper root temperature.

Other challenges surface during the growing season. One is the control of the white fly. Wolter

uses chemicals to keep the pests under control.

"I walk through the greenhouses every day and check for insects," he said. Wolter does so, he said, more as a "preventative-type" measure to ensure the cleanliness and health of the plants.

Every plant, Wolter noted, has special disease risks. Most are root-related. It is important to ensure cleanliness and health of the root system.

Also, lots of sunshine ensure the plant grows steadily and slowly. In seasons without sunshine, the plant stems out, growing too fast. If there is reduced sunlight, Wolter uses growth retardants.

The most profitable plants are the spring bedding plants.

But to ensure a full season, the greenhouses are filled with poinsettias for the holidays.

This spring has been a challenge for the greenhouse industry, Wolter indicated. He cites the "goofiest

spring" he's seen. The weather, with 12 straight days of rain, created problems because customers weren't buying. As a result, normally what would include 30 sales days were cut in half.

Like the agriculture industry, Wolter said, the greenhouse industry is "still dependent on the weather. If the weather is floeey, so is everything else."

Competing in a marketplace that includes large markets such as Hechinger's and Lowes presents its own challenges, too. Wolter caters to people who can't find the rare flowers and for those looking for "better quality, better service to customers," he said. They can stay competitive with the bigger chain stores in price.

"We find that people like variety, like to have the choice," he said. "We prefer to stay smaller," said Wolter, and remain in complete

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The new Temple greenhouse will accommodate an automatic watering system. In the adjacent greenhouse, automatic watering systems place water in the poinsettia plots. Here, Dieter Wolter checks out the watering system.



Erika Wolter is working with cuttings of "Jessica," a yellow mum.