

Miller Plant Farm Blooms With Springtime

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its own separate square, the fragile seedlings suffer minimal transplant shock when moved to market packs or pots.

"Seeders are expensive and require a little more management, but enable us to transplant twice as fast," Miller says of the technology.

Seeded flats are moved into a germination structure Miller designed, where gentle heat is added as needed by tapping warm water from the heating boilers into a series of piping which runs through the unit. Flats in the warm, humid area are watched closely and moved from the heated unit to the cool, airy atmosphere of the greenhouses as soon as a percentage of the seeds have germinated.

"Don't call it dirt," Miller reminds his employees of the blends of potting soil which they mix as needed in a 3-cubic-yard mixer. All greenhouses are sterilized annually and new flats used for many seedling crops, especially peppers and tomatoes.

Watering is critical in greenhouse operations, with temperatures in the enclosed environment susceptible to abrupt changes, as weather conditions may swing from sunshine to clouds many times daily. And, since plant species vary in their responses to temperatures and soil moisture, watering expertise is determining factor to flower and vegetable plant success.

"Our watering is still done by hand, except for our hanging baskets. The person at the end of the hose makes a crop," he emphasizes. "And not watering is sometimes the most important part of it. You have to really watch the plants during long, cloudy spells."

Ventilation is likewise important, aimed at keeping the inside environment of lower humidity than the outside air to dry plant foliage and limit dampness-related diseases. Newer houses at Miller's are equipped with more automatic venting systems than the older structures, but are still monitored carefully.

Improvements in structure plastic have enabled greenhouse operators to re-cover their houses much less frequently than when plastics first began replacing glass. Replacing plastic every year was one of the jobs Miller remembers working with as a teen-ager

helping with the family operation after school.

"When we change plastic on a house, we do it in early morning, at first light, when the air is the most calm," he explains. Generally, this maintenance chore is on the schedule for late fall's chilly mornings, before breezes pick up.

When snow blankets the double-plastic-layer structures, even those empty of plant crops, thermostats are pushed up to generate more heat to melt the accumulation. Miller explains that snow tends to hang on the sides of the structures, which may cause the support pipes to buckle sideways.

During the blizzard of January 1996, props were shoved under leaning support pipes which threatened to collapse greenhouses under the weight of the heavy snow accumulation. Miller recalls being on the greenhouse roof and scooping off snow with buckets, then hearing the props fall to the ground as the pipes sprung back into shape once freed of their burden. While their heating fuel bill escalated, the structures were saved, with only some minor damage.

"I like to see rusty snowplows," quips Miller, of the past two winters which have been relatively mild, with minimal amounts of snow in the York area.

While some flower seedlings are purchased from specialty growers, the Millers start from seed all their vegetable plants.

"That way, we can get the specific varieties we want," he reasons. "We try new varieties for our own use and then can grow seedlings of the ones that do well for our plant customers in successive seasons."

Some 20 acres of sweet corn is grown, planted at weekly intervals from late April through July for succession of harvest. Another five acres are cropped in cantaloupes. These two summer mainstays supply the needs of many of the Miller's wholesale customers, while plantings of tomatoes, peppers and watermelons supplement the variety available for their loyal retail following. All vine crops, like melons, are cultivated under plastic, with trickle irrigation used for maximum moisture utilization.

"In one week last year, we picked 12,000 cantaloupes," remembers Miller with a grin. "Plant breeders have made great strides in developing cantaloupes, Athena



Miller Plant Farm business partner Steve Slyder quips that he is "the mover" of the operation. His moving often entails a tractor and handling equipment to facilitate the constant movement of plant materials and supplies through the 60,000-square-foot-under-roof complex.

and Eclipse are two much firmer varieties which will hold a day or so. That gives us much more flexibility."

In fact, the cantaloupes consumers are purchasing right now in the markets may well be the Athena melon, a variety popular with growers along the East Coast. Harvest begins in Florida and moves north with the season to supply the retail pipeline.

September brings a work force disruption to Millers' busy schedule, with many of their school-age employees returning to classes. While plant work has slowed, the produce continues to ripen. Another cutting of hay might be ready for baling for the 20-30 head of cattle they fatten annually and the fall decorative mainstays — gourds and pumpkins — are ripe for harvest. Some 60 acres of field corn are also beginning to dry down. Often, retirees help round out the work crew.

Poinsettias command center stage in the fall greenhouse season, with shipments of cuttings usually scheduled at three different intervals. The mid-August cuttings grow into the large multiple-bloom plants, while later cuttings provide more individual plants. At peak, some 12,000 poinsettia plants are growing in the complex.

"We live at the latitude where October 6 is the date for bloom initiation for our poinsettias," notes Miller of the darkness-sensitive, traditional holiday plant. "We might begin to see a hint of color on some by the end of the month; and by Thanksgiving, the earliest are ready to go."

Diane Miller handles much of the business' steady stream of office and paperwork, as well as overseeing the busy market and retailing enterprises. She and Dave married in 1974, two years after he graduated and began full-time employment with the family operation.

"She learned fast," he says in praise of his wife, who along with overseeing retail sales, has computerized the office records systems.

Although the Miller farm is a few miles off any major traffic artery, growing numbers of customers regularly stop at the sales area to purchase their seedling and potted plant needs right at the family farm.

"Customers seem to like coming out to the greenhouses,"

acknowledges Miller. "There seems to be a sense of satisfaction at buying right at the source, at picking up plants right where they were grown and having hundreds of them to select from. We believe quality and value play a role in serving customers. And we also try to grow some potted plants, some perennials, some herbs that aren't available just anywhere."

Four bays of the growing area, adjoining the busy sales room, are kept to customers for browsing and plant shopping. While they like to visit with customers about plant needs and answer questions, the Millers are limited in time available for that due to demands of the business. So Miller hopes to expand customer education with more signs posted around the greenhouses offering plant and cultivation information; they have also developed a customer brochure. With retail growing rapidly, Miller's are already thinking ahead to possible future expansion. But quality of life, and family time, are very important among their life priorities.

For instance, once the fall harvest is wrapped up, and the poinsettia crop waiting in the wings, they do take advantage of a slight break in the busy schedule.

"If everything is under control, we go hunting," said Miller of this favorite family pastime. "Mornings and evenings, we'll be in the woods." Attesting to their success are numerous trophy mounts which hang in the business office.

Dave and Diane have three children, Courtney, 21 and a professional barber, 18-year-old Whitney, a physical therapy major, and Dustyn, 16, a sophomore at Daltown High School.

"He takes a lot of kidding about being called 'Dusty Miller'," jokes Miller of his son sharing the popular name of the white-foilage

ed bedding plant. "But there was no pun intended." Dusty, adds his dad, does help with the business and shows some interest in carrying on the horticultural tradition.

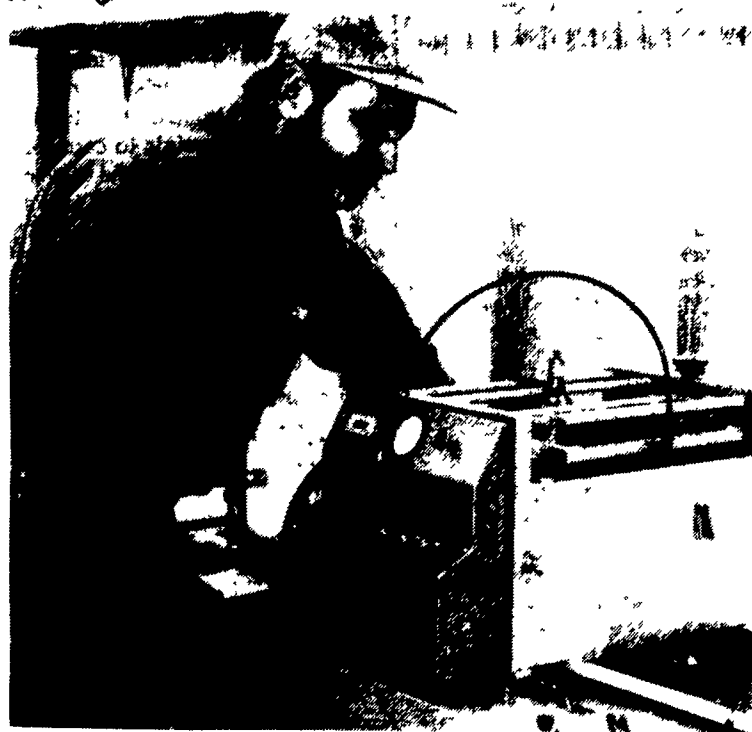
"But it will be up to him," he emphasizes of their son's future career choice.

A leader in the region's horticulture industry, Miller is involved in the York County Vegetable Growers Association and the Penn State Horticulture Council, a curriculum advisory panel for the university. He is serving his fifth year on the state-appointed Pennsylvania Vegetable and Marketing Research Board, which developed and implemented an acreage assessment among its members for research and promotion.

In 1997, more than \$63,000 was contributed by the 1,247 participating produce growers who supported the program, with funding awarded to the most cost-effective university and/or private firms' programs targeting selected research projects. A sweet corn pest monitoring program is just one of the research studies currently under way. Some matching funds from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture help with promotional efforts, including the Simply Delicious logo developed for use with the program. The Board holds a referendum every five years among the growers to determine support and levels of voluntary acreage checkoffs for the program.

Such community leadership efforts, development of the retail business and willingness to work with the agriculture industry all played a role in the Miller Plant Farm's recognition by the York Chamber of Commerce.

"Knowing some of the earlier recipients," Miller says modestly, "it's quite an honor for us to have been selected."



Dave Miller checks on the Niagra seeder unit, which seeds 512 small "cells" in trays, a seed to each cell, using an electric eye. The specialized unit makes handling small, costly seeds more uniform and resulting seedlings suffer less transplant shock.

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