

pcfemail message tracking #: 00248d8045f06fb4-1957

date: Mon May 19 08:47:45 -0400 2014

from: sentinelruralnews@gmail.com

subject: Your story

to: frenchtown@pcfemail.com



Headline: A life of beauty

Sub-head: Frenchtown Greenhouse and the adventure of plants

by Travis Rogers, Jr.

It is the best-smelling place around. The flowers in bloom, the trees putting forth their leaves, even the scent of the rich potting soil make this a place where you want to just stand and absorb the surroundings.

Frenchtown Greenhouse began at the dairy farm of Alvin and Vera Martin on Frenchtown Avenue in Withee which they purchased over 33 years ago.

Alvin and Vera used an 8x12 greenhouse to begin growing flowers and plants for themselves, their family and friends. The hobby expanded into a business in Spring, 2000 when they moved into a 30x48 greenhouse.

By 2006, it had become clear that the business needed to expand again. The semi tractor-trailers were having difficulty making the turns at the farm site and it was determined by Alvin and Vera that a retail site would need to be opened.

Their daughter Marietta had married Marlin Zimmerman who was working at Thorcraft in Thorp.

An agreement was struck between the Martins and Zimmermans with the result that the Zimmermans would reside at the newly purchased retail site $\frac{1}{4}$ mile south of the original farm.

They began making the transition in Autumn of 2006 and had hoped to finish the move (and moving into the home there) by the Spring of 2007 but a cold-snap made completion difficult.

"I don't ever want to go through that again," Marlin declares.

The partnership still exists. Much of the plantings take place at the farm and are then retailed at the greenhouse. Vera and Marietta do all the flowers while Marlin takes care of the nursery, seeing to the trees, the shrubbery and the vegetables. Alvin still takes care of the 100 cows on the dairy farm.

Marlin says that they employ six full-time workers and several part-timers including some that are one-day workers.

At the time I was speaking with Marlin, he was preparing for the Customer Appreciation Days which was held last weekend, May 16-17. Part of the preparation was the seeding of 12,000 tomato plants—1,500 of which would be handed out to the appreciated customers.

Not only are the products available for retail purchase, Frenchtown Greenhouse supplies rental greenery for events at Munson Bridge Winery and for last weekend's Alice in Dairyland activities.

They also sell to florists and other greenhouses nearby like Thorp and Stetsonville and at a distance like Green Bay and Minnesota. A Minnesota reseller said that it is "more profitable to spend the gas and make the drive to Frenchtown Greenhouse" than to buy his flowers and plants at his local markets and retailers.

A discussion with Marlin Zimmerman is a lesson in life, not just the life of plants but in living with

the seasons and our surroundings. Marlin outlines the schedule of the seasons for the success of the greenhouse and the plants and flowers they pass along to their grateful customers.

In discussing the differences between annuals and perennials, Marlin turns philosophical. The perennials are those flowers that will return every year while the annuals bloom for one year only. The perennials are slow to bloom and they do not flower profusely but the annuals burst forth in blooms.

“Since the seeds are put out in the flowers,” Marlin explains, “the annuals know that they will not return, so they put their life into many beautiful blooms in order to spread their seeds and guarantee that life goes on.”

The perennials, however, know that their life is long and are not faced with the urgency of producing many seeds at once. The allegory is not lost on me when he describes his own five children as his “most precious flowers.”

Asked what is the most popular flower that they sell and Marlin answers without hesitation, “The petunias are the most popular. They come in so many colors—even black.” Marietta comes to point out the black-petaled flower in one of the hanging baskets.

I said that those must be popular for funerals. Marlin laughed but Marietta smiled but answered, “Well, those are popular to mix with red and white flowers. Those are the popular colors right now.”

There are tropical plants. The azaleas and crotons are eye-catchers. Several species of cacti also grab the attention in their arid planters.

In addition to the flowers are the vegetables: broccoli, cabbages, cantaloupes, peppers and tomatoes and more. The trees include over 500 fruit trees with Honeycrisp apples being the most popular.

Marietta explains that they have expanded their planting of the hanging baskets so that there are still fresh baskets even later in the year. Also for later in the year, they have added pumpkins and gourds to be sold along with the 4,000 mums that are sold later in the year.

The ornamentals vary in great degree as there are varieties of evergreens and shrubs. Marlin is also happy to point out the Hokkaido Cherry Trees, knowing my connection to Japan. These come from the northernmost of Japan’s four major islands. “I wanted to give these a try,” he says.

“They should be blooming soon.”

Sure enough, when I returned on last Saturday, the Hokkaido was starting to blossom in its beautiful pink buds. In fact, everything was starting to bloom in anticipation of the late-arriving spring.

Certain machines and computerized controls have made things easier for them at the greenhouse. The temperatures are regulated—to remain between 55 and 60 degrees—by a computerized monitor.

One piece of equipment that has saved a lot of time is a potting soil dispenser and leveler that fills up the planting pots with soil and then sweeps an arm across the pot, thus leveling the soil flush with the top of the pot.

“The potting soil comes from Canada,” Marlin said, “and we sell a lot of it. We don’t just use it all ourselves.”

There are stands for the hanging baskets, planter pots, fence sections, wall-hangings and more.

There is everything one would need for starting, expanding or completing landscaping and gardening.

“Is everything here available for purchase?” I asked him. “Everything except my most precious flowers,” Marlin answers, “and those are my children.”

Frenchtown Greenhouse is located a little over a mile west of Withee and two miles north of County X on Frenchtown Avenue. They are open from April through November from Monday through Friday—8:00 a.m to 8:00 p.m—and on Saturday from 8:00 a.m to 6:00p.m.

Go for the sights and scents and take some home with you.

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