



Grown close to home

Peoria Gardens ships annuals, perennials, edibles and baskets to garden centers along the I-5 corridor

Tom Verhoeven started Peoria Gardens 27 years ago on a plot of land near Corvallis, Ore. it has developed into a robust business serving independent garden centers in western Oregon and southwest Washington.

By Curt Kipp

Tom Verhoeven has grown his business the same way he grows his plants — from the ground up.

He founded Peoria Gardens 27 years ago in a couple of Quonset greenhouses along Peoria Road in rural Albany, Ore., across the Willamette River from Corvallis. Today, the business is thriving, with five acres of greenhouse production and two additional acres of outdoor production.

The wholesale nursery business grows annuals, herbaceous perennials, vegetable starts and hanging baskets,

and sells them to independent garden centers in western Oregon and southwest Washington.

“Week after week, (we grow) what they need to fulfill their inventory needs in those areas,” Verhoeven said.

Pansies and violas are grown and sold three seasons of the year, with summer as the exception. Among the perennials Peoria Gardens grows are hostas, lupines, gaillardias and rudibeckias. The grower also produces poinsettias during the holiday season.

Notable by their absence? Trees and woody shrubs. Peoria Gardens doesn’t grow them. The grower also eschews long-distance shipping, selling only to nurseries within one day’s drive, round trip.

From seed to shipment

Although Verhoeven does occasionally buy plugs from propagation nurseries — usually licensed annuals — most of his plants are grown from seeds or cuttings.

“We try to be as self-sufficient, as vertically integrated as possible,” Verhoeven said.

His year-round crew of 24, which expands to 54 during the busy season, cares for the plants until it’s time to ship them to customers. But the story doesn’t end there.

The finished plants then are loaded onto the grower’s own trucks and delivered to customers by the grower’s own drivers. The drivers provide personalized service. For many customers, they are the face of the company.

Customers can place their orders

online, over the phone or by FAX, and they’ll be on the truck the next day. Peoria’s customers know which day of the week is “shipping day” for their area, whether they happen to be located in Chehalis, Wash., or Ashland, Ore. The focus of the business is on high-quality plants and excellent, friendly service.

“I know that sounds old fashioned, but those are the hallmarks of a good greenhouse business,” Verhoeven said. “People can rely on our quality and our inventory.”

Within the nursery’s chosen domain of annuals, perennials and edibles, Verhoeven stresses variety. It takes a huge number of choices to serve the needs of the independent garden centers that are his customers.

“We have on our list about 2,000

species and varieties,” Verhoeven said. “If you count all the different colors of petunias and all the varieties of perennials, it’s crazy.”

According to sales manager Tom Cammarota, many varieties are available in different sizes. “It’s too much,” he said.

Starting small

Like many successful nurserymen, Verhoeven started small. He grew up in a family of gardeners and always enjoyed plants and the outdoors. He attended Oregon State University and took his Bachelor of Science degree with a major in botany and plant pathology. He had ideas that he might work in forestry or plant ecology.

“I soon discovered I was more inclined to business, and something

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Peoria Gardens has several employees who have been with the company a decade or more. Shown with owner Tom Verhoeven are Grace Boulger (left) and Margarett Hershberger.

more active than academia," he said.

After working in a couple of garden centers, Verhoeven determined that he should start his own nursery, but it would be a wholesale nursery. He found property that's located across the street from his current location and dove in.

He and his wife Mary purchased the property and relocated to it. The fledgling business became Tom's career, but Mary continued to work at Oregon State University as a breeder of wheat and cereal grains. They had two children, Betsy and Ben, who were raised on the property. The nursery expanded and later moved across the road.

Today, Betsy is in college and Ben is working at the nursery in various capacities. Mary passed away earlier this year after a brave struggle against cancer.

"We started with two little Quonset greenhouses and grew steadily and slowly," he said. "It's a pretty simple story."

The future (near and far)

Because Peoria Gardens specializes in annuals and herbaceous perennials, the business is very agile and can navigate the sometimes-treacherous changes in the marketplace.

"Our crop cycles are short, so we can react quickly to trends and changes in demand," Verhoeven said.

This happens not only on a yearly basis, but on a weekly basis. Verhoeven often can check the weather forecasts and get an idea of how many plants he'll be shipping out that week.

If the weather is going to be lousy, consumers won't be visiting garden centers. And if consumers don't visit garden centers, then garden centers won't be ordering as much from the grower.

This is the risk Verhoeven takes. Everything he grows is grown on speculation. "If people order it and we've got it, we'll ship it," he said. "We try to keep enough of an inventory that we can always ship."

As with any nursery owner, Verhoeven has seen changes over the years and expects to see more. Few would be surprised to hear that his sales of many annuals are down, but perennials are up, and vegetable starts have really come on strong in the last few years.

"It's the only area where we've been consistently up the last few years," Verhoeven said.

For the future, Verhoeven expects to see continuations of current trends. Smaller yards. More interest in edibles and perennials. Less interest in annuals.

But always, a continued interest in gardening.

"People are going to continue to garden," Verhoeven said. "It's encouraging to see a lot of 20-somethings gardening and a lot of that comes through the door of the edibles movement." ☺

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