

GROWERTALKS

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Acres & Acres

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The caladium farmers around Lake Placid, Florida, are like farmers everywhere: They love a good laugh and they love to spin a good yarn. Like when they're giving tours to busloads of tourists during Lake Placid's annual Caladium Festival and they're driving past the rich muck fields where more than 95% of the world's caladiums are produced, one farmer might exaggerate how deep the highly decomposed peat muck is by saying that, if you leave your tractor in the field during the rainy season, it will have disappeared when you come out the next morning.

We laughed a lot when I spent an afternoon with Don and Dot Bates—the “Son” (and his wife) in Bates Sons & Daughters; the “daughters” being Don and Dot's daughters Sheri Bates, Terri Bates Cantwell and Heidi Bates. We laughed at how Don's dad “Poppy” Bates would only wear a Bates & Sons cap—he couldn't bring himself to wear one with “Daughters” on it.

But caladiums are big business. As mentioned, more than 95% of the world's supply of caladiums comes from the muck fields near Lake Placid, on about 1,500 acres managed by just 20 producers. Caladium tubers love the muck's highly acidity (3.5 pH brought up to about 4.2) and high nitrogen holding capacity. The Bates farm 10% of that acreage and produce about six million bulbs a year.

There's breeding going on, primarily at the University of Florida, but the emphasis is on fusarium resistance, not introducing dozens of new colors every year. Old staples such as White Christmas and Frieda Hemple are mainstays of the market.

Tissue culture is gaining in importance—to produce disease-free seed tubers—but it's slow and expensive and has to be redone every few years. The Bates have been introducing TC varieties to their line since the late '80s but still only have about a dozen of their 35 varieties through the TC program.

A while back, caladium farmers hit on hard times that they're still recovering from. Don Bates says what looked like a disease problem to outsiders was actually caused by years and years of complacency by caladium farmers who, because demand continually outstripped supply, could sell anything they produced. Varieties got mixed; diseases such as fusarium entered the fields; customers got shorted.

The Bates avoided this trap. As early as 1981, they were working closely with the University of Florida's Bradenton Research Center on disease prevention techniques. Eventually, other growers joined forces in a box tax to fund additional research. The Bates have embraced TC since 1987. And as for customer service, ask any of Bates' customers about service and quality and you'll hear nothing but stellar reports.

The Bates are exploring new markets, including Internet sales (www.caladiumsonline.com) and controlled storage of bulbs for summer sales. Prefinished pots (under the business name Capital Caladiums) are an up-and-coming business; they sell some 500,000 to 750,000 4-in., 4 1/2-in. and 6-in. pots to small and medium-sized growers in the

Southeast. Caladiums can take a long time on the bench when it's cool, whereas a prefinished pot can be ready to sell in a matter of weeks.

Finally, it seems that the caladium business requires a woman's hand. Don Bates admits that in every caladium business, there has to be some dominant mother or wife—the matriarch of the family who pretty much runs the business and pays attention to detail. Dot spends as much time on the telephone with somebody who buys two boxes of bulbs as somebody who buys 200 boxes, he says. “There's one exception in all the caladium growers that I've ever known where there wasn't a mother or a wife who played this role. And that business has not necessarily profited,” he says.

Which means that, with three daughters leading the business into the future, Bates Sons and Daughters is three times as likely to succeed.