

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Going Once ... Inside an Amish Auction

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It was a feeding frenzy at Yoder Auction Services May 4 as a throng of 100-plus garden center buyers, produce stand owners, landscapers and consumers sought to outbid each other for flowers grown by the Amish farmers around the community of Kolona, Iowa. This was one of the twice-weekly Amish produce auctions that auctioneer Stan Yoder (in the tan shirt and cap) hosts from April through October.

Amish produce auctions started in Ohio in the 1990s as a way for Amish farmers to grow more profitable crops on their

shrinking farms. In recent years, many Amish had been forced by economic realities to find construction or factory work, which jeopardized their family values-oriented lifestyle. Produce offers a higher yield and better profits in less space than livestock or field crops. The idea spread through Amish communities across the east and Midwest, including Iowa, where in 2001 auctioneer Stan Yoder had opened his Frytown auction to handle farm equipment, estate sales and so on. A local Amish farmer, Duane Miller, approached Stan with the idea of doing produce auctions. A group of 20 Amish farmers met to get it rolling. It's grown sporadically since then, but has really taken off in the last two years.

Flowers entered the scene a few years later, as a way to have something to sell before berry and tomato season. Ball Seed sales rep Clyde Seery has quite a few Amish growers who he's helped start in the business. He's even organized bus trips from Iowa to the Ball Customer Day and to Four Star Greenhouse's Open House ... you could see Four Star's influence on the spectacular mixed baskets the Amish are growing.

At this particular auction, 17 Amish farmers brought in a wide variety of products, from basic flats to spectacular hanging baskets, along with some unusual local planters, such as old shoes, tea kettles and tree stumps. Delivery is primarily via picturesque horse-drawn wagon. This Mother's Day week auction grossed \$28,500, up from \$16,500 last year. By the way, any grower can bring their plants to these auctions—they're not exclusively Amish. **GT**