

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Tried and True

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Tried and true is a fitting motto for Eastside Gardens in Pittsfield, Illinois, where owner Bill Scheiwe says they don't try too many experiments; they go with what works.

What worked for Bill and his wife, Eileen, in the beginning, still works for them today. In 1992, they swapped growing hydroponic tomatoes for marigolds, New Guinea impatiens and petunias. The flowers sold out in two weeks.

These days, the original flowers are in the mix and have been joined by vincas, begonias, Summer Wave torenia, ivy geraniums, daisies and ferns. Bill grows veggies like tomatoes, peppers and broccoli, but sales were not solid enough to

support growing more vegetables. They started small with perennials such as hostas, daylilies, veronica, salvia, but now have 150 different varieties.

Bill spent many years using his agricultural economics and animal science majors. He farmed for a few years in his hometown of Buckley, Illinois, worked for the University of Illinois Extension office, spent time in Kentucky, and next moved to Pittsfield where he had started an Extension office. From there, he got into the animal health business, and then switched to building and selling livestock structures.

Growing smiles

One day, as Bill expressed his frustration over undependable employees, a building materials' supplier told Bill to get into the greenhouse business. A surprised Bill asked, "Why?" His supplier replied, "At the shows, the livestock people are always growling, but the greenhouse people are happy and smiling." With smiles on their faces, Bill and Eileen began growing their hydroponic tomatoes in the mid-1980s.

Now, Eastside Gardens grows and sells on about one acre, preferring to stay small and subscribing to the adage, "We're not getting bigger, we're getting better." The covered retail area is also the growing area with 5,000 sq. ft. dedicated to annuals and 3,000 sq. ft. given to perennials.

Eileen and Bill work full-time throughout the busy season. They have a staff of three full-time and three part-time workers coordinating shifts to ensure two to three people are on hand each day. Daughter Tiffany Calzone does the bookkeeping and the ordering by computer from St. Louis; and daughter Heather Hayden takes care of the advertising and public relations. The garden center is not open year-round, which gives Bill time to do the repair work on the buildings and plant for the spring. For instance, the ferns have already been started.

Eastside Gardens' product sales break down to 60% retail and 40% wholesale. Bill says he doesn't sell to grocery stores, and big box stores are not much of a problem because Eastside offers quality plants. He tells of a customer who went to a garden center—a wholesale customer of Bill's—but came back to Eastside where he "likes the plants better."

Consumer confidence

Customers of Eastside Gardens come from as far away as St. Louis and Indiana to buy flowers. Pittsfield, a town of 4,400 people, is in west central Illinois between the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers, about 70 miles west of Springfield and about 100 miles northwest of St. Louis. Bill says that by word of mouth, more customers come every year from farther away and from towns with garden centers. While middle-aged people continue to be the core customers, changing trends that Bill sees are young people with young families and more men by themselves buying flowers and vegetables.

Garden groups and school groups (pre-K to 2nd grade) benefit from Eastside Gardens every spring, too. For no charge during the growing season, about 300 to 400 kids tour the greenhouses, are shown how Eastside grows plants, and plant their own pansies or violas (to appease the instant-gratification seekers).

Eastside tips

From his years of experience at Eastside Gardens, Bill offers these tips for other growers:

Documentation. Bill has learned to keep records of the number of plants they've grown and the number of plants they've sold. "If you end up growing too much, you have to throw it away," Bill says. Save on the utility bills by growing just what you need.

Specialize in something. They plant containers for customers, one-of-a-kind for Mother's Day. Ivy geranium baskets are popular, as well as the Spherical Wonders: 16-in., 24-in. and 32-in. baskets with soil, moss and Purple Wave petunias. "We push the container gardening area," says Bill. "We pick the plants to put together; we charge for the plants, for storage and for replanting the next year." To let customers in on what's happening, Eastside mails 3,000-4,000 newsletters in the spring that showcases their containers, classes and tips for gardening and for news on edible gardens. An open house in March gives customers a preview of the goods for the spring.

Try new things, but go easy. "It's been said they're difficult to grow, but we tried the hiemalis begonia," says Bill. "We light them for two to three weeks to get the blooms going. A customer came 120 miles for those flowers."

Service. At Eastside, they carry flowers to everyone's car and find room to place the purchases. "I don't think

people get that service anymore,” says Bill. “Small businesses have to provide something extra. We have good help. We try to keep the same help so we don’t have to train new ones.”

Enjoy what you do. Bill says, “When you’re finished with the year and say, ‘That was tough,’ but a week later you’re excited about next year and the new plants you’ll try—those are good challenges. My body is sore and I get frustrated. I can retire, but I don’t want to; I have great satisfaction because I like what I do.” **GT**

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