

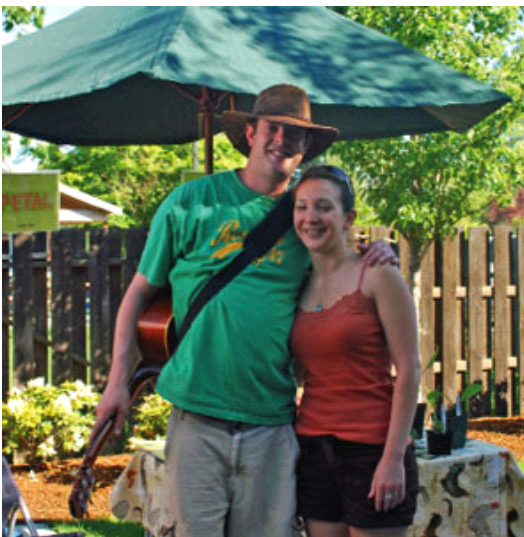
# GROWERTALKS

## Under an Acre

10/25/2010

### Petal Pushers

*Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio*



As self-confessed hortiholics, husband and wife, Dave and Annilese Doolittle have it bad. It all started when they were young. Kids usually tear up their mothers' gardens by riding their bikes through them or by tracking down overthrown balls. But when Annilese was eight years old, she split her mother's hostas to sell the cuttings in yogurt cups at the farmers' markets. She was forgiven after she was caught red-handed with part of her mother's favorite hosta. Throughout her childhood, Annilese and her mother spent many hours in conversation over hosta characteristics, growing techniques and pricing. Annilese's wisdom about her mother's one hundred varieties earned her "The Hosta Girl" title.

Annilese turned that love of the earth into a college major and stayed in her hometown of Urbana, Illinois, to receive an environmental sciences degree from University of Illinois. While Annilese was selling hostas in Illinois, Dave, as a boy in California, became aware of the peace that his mother's garden brought to her. As a working single parent raising four boys, her garden was her sanctuary.

Dave and Annilese followed similar, but not simultaneous, paths with internships and employment at EuroAmerican Propagators in San Diego and Terra Nova Nurseries in Portland. Presently, Dave is Terra Nova's director of marketing and international licensing.

Since the two met, married and put down roots in West Linn, Oregon, just 20 minutes from Portland, they've combined their horticultural obsessions. In 2008, they began growing plants. The following year they incorporated Petal Heads, their home-based growing business. A portion of Dave's job at Terra Nova is to travel around the world to examine cultivars, which led to the unique varieties of plants that Petal Heads grows.

"We grow nearly everything that we sell," says Dave. "The few exceptions are our annuals. Without heat, we don't have the ability to have big, beautiful annuals in early spring; we buy them pre-finished from EuroAmerican," he adds. He and Annilese grow specialty perennials such as *Syneilesis palmata*,

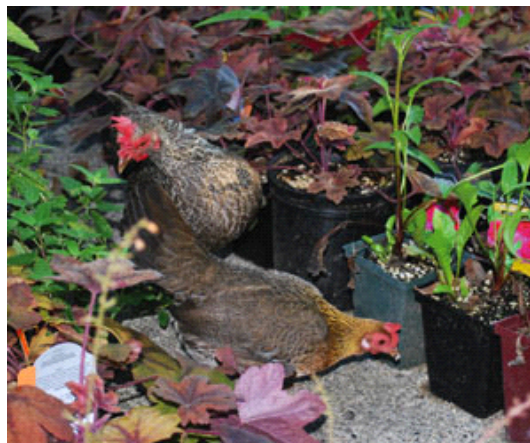
Podophyllum “Spotty Dotty” and double hellebores. Dave says they grow upscale, premium varieties that appeal to two types of customers—the plant-educated gardeners and the gardeners who want to venture down a different path and learn. “When space allows, we plan on expanding to natives and more inexpensive varieties,” he adds. And, considering Annilese’s background, they have an extraordinary hosta collection.

## A petal apart

The cold-grown plants, Dave says, are what set Petal Heads apart from other growers. “We see many of our customers displaying heuchera with elongated petioles in early spring,” Dave says. “Sure, they are big and beautiful, but what is going to happen to the plant when it’s exposed to the long, cold Oregon spring? Our plants may be smaller, but the gardener has a rewarding experience ahead of him,” he says.

The driveway and shaded areas on the couple’s quarter-acre property provide the growing area. Because they grow the perennials outside, Dave says it allows them to experience all four seasons, developing what they believe to be a tougher plant. He built two small hoop houses that can withstand the rain and the wind, since a spring storm blew away their first 3-ft. high hoop house. Dave’s determined to build the next hoop house tall enough to accommodate his 6-ft. 5-in. build.

Dave and Annilese operate the business from their home with no storefront, and as the Petal Heads name becomes known in the community, more gardeners request to stop by to purchase plants. They usually operate by appointment or have events like the “Sweet Tea” promotion when they showcase the drink and the plant. Petal Heads has the occasional drop-in customer with no forewarning. “We love it!” says Dave. “It gives us an excuse to open a bottle of wine, tell stories about plants and get to know our customers.”



Even so, 95% of Petal Heads’ sales come from farmers’ markets and specialty plant sales throughout Oregon. They wholesale their plants for charity events and speak about specialty plants at garden club events. “We truly love what we do,” Dave says, “we don’t expect to have clean nails and we never take ourselves too seriously.”

## Heeding the Petal Heads’ advice

**Slugs!** Unfortunately, there is an abundance of moisture-loving slugs in the Northwest. Dave and Annilese try to use as many organic products on their plants as possible. Sluggo and hazelnut shells are Petal Heads’ best defenses.

**Don’t forget to make money:** It’s not uncommon to see competitors undercutting their prices. “We are all in the business because of its nature,” Dave says. “We have to make a decision to do what we love and make money, or just do what we love. Price your product appropriately and be content. Don’t forget the value of the plant and how to make it more valuable.”

**Start a small business in a down economy:** Dave and Annilese note they were instantly forced to

evaluate their bottom line and to keep an eye on every aspect of the business. "With this small of an operation, a loss not only affects the business, it affects us directly. Get good at the basics of operating a business. Grow, but only as big as the sales will allow. Do you need a brand new truck or would a used one suffice?"

**How big to grow?** Understand that once your operation gets big enough for you to hire people, you as the owner, aren't going to be potting plugs; now you'll have to do payroll and HR. Instead of watering, you'll have to make sure the employees show up on time and properly water.

**Educate your customers:** "Garden centers and box stores don't talk to the consumers about their products," Dave and Annilese say. "We talk to our customers." **GT**

---

*Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio is a freelance writer in New Rochelle, New York.*