

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Sibling Revelry

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Forty miles north of Detroit, brothers Ben and Joe Fogler have expanded their fourth-generation family farm stand, Fogler's Greenhouse, into 39,000 sq. ft. of indoor growing space. The business has come a long way from its humble beginnings in the 1920s, when their great-grandfather founded a dairy and grain farm, that later progressed into a small orchard and then a vegetable farm. The next two generations worked the farm and sold fruits and vegetables at the stand.

As kids, Ben and Joe spent every summer at the roadside stand, waiting on customers and picking fruits and vegetables. In the fall, they harvested pumpkins and the field crops of corn and wheat. After graduating from high school in the mid-'90s, Ben, the eldest, and Joe added the first greenhouse next to the fruit stand; two years later they expanded Fogler's Greenhouse with a larger retail area.

"Not knowing much about flowers, we had a sales rep come out," Joe recalls. "We filled up [the greenhouse] with flats, 4 1/2-in. pots and some baskets. To our surprise, we sold everything in the place."

Since that time, they've expanded every other year or so, and doubled their retail space last year. Ben and Joe have grown from children helping on the family farm to president and treasurer, respectively, of the business.



But the rest of the family is still active. Their grandmother, Ruth, makes sure everything runs smoothly; and parents Dennis and Joyce, plus uncle and aunt Mike and Jennifer, all contribute to the farm operation, which includes the production and sales of flowers, fruits and vegetables. Joe's wife, Anne, works on the displays; and according to her husband, has an eye for design. Not to be left out are Ben's four children and Joe's two children, who like to drive the farm vehicles and pick the produce in the fields. As children tend to get distracted easier than adults, the picking at times gets interrupted by impromptu food fights. Veggies that aren't up to par for the farm stand are hurled

through the air toward siblings and cousins.

While vegetables rain “Cloudy With A Chance of Meatballs”-style among the kids, there’s no rivalry between the brothers—Joe says the two get along pretty well. He spends more time in retail and attends the IGC show in Chicago and AmericasMart, while Ben does some retail and takes care of production and repairs.

Ben’s fabrication skills comes in handy when he and Joe maintain their 10 gutter-connected greenhouses, which includes retail; three large Quonsets for restocking; and 3,000 sq. ft. of outdoor space. Within the 39,000 sq. ft. of indoor growing space is 27,000 sq. ft. of retail. A large barn houses hardgoods and pottery where customers can get to large baskets, 4 1/2-in. pots, perennials, veggies, shade combo baskets and shade plants.

Fogler’s is open April 1 (or Easter, whatever falls first) to Halloween. Two to three additional employees help the family plant in February and March. Up to 10 people are on staff in May and June. When summer is in full swing, the fruitstand kicks in. Peaches, tomatoes and sweet corn are the big sellers during the season. The selection is broad: cucumbers, zucchini, green beans, onions, squash, cabbage, blueberries, broccoli, watermelon, Brussels sprouts, apples, gourds and pumpkins.

Ben and Joe say along with the produce, it’s good to have flowers going from May to August—customers need additions or fill-ins to their gardens. Gentle reminders of pottery, gloves and ornamental wrought iron from Steel Heart, Ltd., and Deer Park Ironworks are set up at the register. During autumn, Fogler’s offers hayrides, a corn maze and a pick-your-own pumpkin patch.

Rochester, Michigan, is a middle- to upper-class area populated with more than 12,000 people. Ben and Joe say their customers come from the surrounding towns, but the majority comes from Rochester, with a breakdown of 80% female to 20% male of all ages.

Customer service is a big part of their business, says Joe. They carry product to customers’ cars, plant pots for them and replace plants if something isn’t right, no questions asked. Joe says that having the two of them in the greenhouse shows customers that they are hard at work, that the bosses are there and they’ll do whatever it takes to help. “Always being there develops great customer relations,” says Joe.

Ben and Joe admit that they’ve learned from trial and error and that they’re still making mistakes. They’ve learned to buy in plants that take longer to grow. They grow perennials, fruit in the winter, gerbera daisies, vegetables, azaleas and annuals; they buy and sell seeds, and unique pottery from Vietnam, Malaysia and Connecticut craftsman Guy Wolff. Joe says their most popular planted items are the 12-in. and 14-in. combos. The shade combinations are taking off as well, Joe says. He adds, “People plant whole gardens at our place.”

Tips from Ben and Joe

- Think about the timetable that is needed from a grower’s standpoint. Some flowers need a longer time to finish. Save on heat by buying in plants.
- Don’t be afraid to think out of the box—you don’t know until you try. There are so many different plants that are introduced every year that a grower has to change his combination recipes and table layouts to keep up; also, a great selection of unique pottery and always changing displays around really helps.
- Keep your greenhouses up to date.

- Heat only what you need. They have plastic walls that they take down when more growing areas are needed. They also use homemade heat curtains.
 - In the outside growing area, let Mother Nature take care of the plants. **GT**
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