

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

9/26/2011

Mums for Everyone

Pam Buddy-D'Ambrosio



The Mum Farm sits amid an expanse of open land in New Hartford, New York, five minutes from Utica in the center of the state. Original owners Janet and Gerard Fuess started the business in 1965 when Janet grew chrysanthemums as a hobby and sold the excess plants.

Janet and Gerard, Cornell University graduates, sent their daughter Shelley to the school where she enrolled in the Horticulture Program.

While at Cornell, Shelley met her future husband, Carleton Corey, who was studying for his Master's in education. Carleton was teaching vocational agriculture in a classroom with an attached greenhouse. He grew plants for a fundraiser and enjoyed it so much he enrolled in the Horticulture Program at Cornell. The family is on its third generation of Cornell graduates with Shelley and Carleton's daughter, Courtney, having attended the university.

In 1991, Shelley and Carleton bought The Mum Farm from her parents. Presently, Janet and Gerard's business, Empire Mums, sells across the country. The Coreys say they've lost count of Janet's hybridization patents. When the figure was last tallied, it was 34. There are patents of mums with names like Empire Spotlight, of which the female parent was a purple decorative garden mum and the male parent was a pink decorative garden mum; and Empire Rhapsody, a mix of a purple decorative garden mum and a red daisy garden mum. Shelley and Carleton say this year is the release of Emma Orange Bicolor and Emma Salmon Bicolor, a terra cotta colored mum.

Carleton says the mums that don't go into the pipeline at Empire are sold to retail customers at The Mum Farm. He adds that some plants are so unique they don't have a variety name yet.

The Coreys grow 2,000 varieties of mums, 12,000 mums in all for Hardiness Zone 5. Carleton says, "We don't like to sell less than hardy; we let the competition do 'iffy'."

They grow 95% of the spring plants and bring in some trees and shrubs, and geraniums from a specialized grower. There is an acre of growing area with 9,000 sq. ft. under plastic. Shelley says they sell functional garden accents, teak garden furniture, weathervanes, garden fountains, containers and cast stone statuary, terra cotta and glazed pottery. They have one truck with a trailer and deliver to their retail customers and two

wholesale clients. The Mum Farm sells to several local municipalities, colleges and restaurants.

The business is open from May “until the last mum is sold in October,” says Shelley. She and Carleton are the only employees until their family members see that they’re stressed; then Shelley’s parents, sister and the Corey children come to their aid.

People hear about The Mum Farm from its happy customers. Carleton says, “We spent part of our operating budget on advertising: print, television, radio, billboards and even a hot air balloon. It’s a hard thing to gauge and return is minimal. Our conclusion: a satisfied customer is the best advertising.”

Customers, mostly female, ages 45-65, come from the suburbs of Utica: New Hartford, a town of about 21,000 people; Clinton; and Whitesboro. “The Mum Farm is not on the beaten path,” says Carleton, “It’s a destination trip—nothing else is out there.” He adds, “It’s in a rural setting at what used to be a dairy/poultry farm.”

“Our customers get a good feeling when they shop, especially in the spring when they come in, they’re so excited to see us. They’re like family members; customers cook for us during our busy time,” say Carleton. The Coreys say they get great recipes from their customers and the recipes have become a part of the Corey’s traditional dishes.

Carleton says, “We’re in the Rust Belt—the economy is lackluster and not because of recent economics. We’ve lost much of our industry and the Air Force base. It’s a depressed area, so you have to do everything you can to keep customers.”

They say they don’t concern themselves with competition, but stay focused on their business. “All the area growers tend to grow a little different mix and have their niches, ours being container gardening in the spring and the mums in the fall. We sell a far superior mum plant than what the box stores sell and for less money,” says Shelley. Carleton says Shelley is a talented floral arranger and uses her skill on the combination containers with mums and added texture plants. Shelley says the mum hanging baskets form an extraordinary ball of color for the fall.

“When we started we were the only ones with mums. Once mums became more popular is when the pricing competition started,” says Carleton. “We do volume discounts; people take 10-20 mums, unload their cars at home and come back for more,” says Shelley. They offer the public a quantity purchase price between wholesale and retail with excellent results.

Money-saving ideas from Shelley and Carleton:

- “It’s important that we watch our expenses and our advertising budget. We have very little shrinkage.”
- “In light of the fact that we have a limited number of people, we grow the crops, take care of customers, and put out fires. During the down months we go over advertising and repairs and close up, which takes us to late November. Throughout the winter, we visit the accountant for taxes, planning and closing out the year. Carleton takes care of repairs and expansions. At the end of February, we’re back in the greenhouse growing annuals and perennials.”

Tips for other growers:

- Take a genuine interest in your customers. Give them all the free advice they ask for even if they end up buying the product elsewhere. Eventually, they learn to value your expertise and become a customer.
- Be honest.
- Stay current. Grow limited amounts of new varieties the first year. If they prove to be exceptional and well received, grow a few more the next year. **GT**

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