

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Behind the Business: Tiger By the Tail

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This month: Gary Doerr tells the story of meeting his perennial hero, Adrian Bloom, and eventually coming to own Blooms of Bressingham despite forgetting to get a passport for his first trip to England..

"I graduated from Ohio State University in ornamental horticulture, but there was no discussion of perennials, other than the ones that appeared in the Extension Service's 'weed catalog' ... perennial flowers were just not part of the training.

"After graduating from Penn State [in 1976, with a Masters in horticulture] I went to Indiana, following a woman. I married her in Lafayette, Indiana—she was a Ph.D. grad assistant at Purdue—and we moved to Vincennes, Indiana. Virginia had grown up on a family farm, and she had worked for an estate north of Detroit and they had a beautiful perennial garden. She introduced me to perennials through Alan Bloom's books. Vincennes isn't a very big town, but she found the Alan Bloom Perennials for your Garden book in the local bookstore, and that's how I got turned on to perennials. And then we saw one of Blooms of Bressingham's mail order catalogs, which was phenomenal.

"Eventually Virginia and I started our own business, Peppergrove Perennials, in Lapeer, Michigan. We joined the Perennial Plant Association and went to Columbus, Ohio, for a meeting, and Alan and Adrian Bloom were there. I was probably in my early 30s, and I was just awestruck, because of all the things that they'd accomplished. Of course, I just wasn't in the circle of people that they were hanging out with. It was hard to get close to them at all.

"Well, I went home and thought about all this, and I thought, 'Peppergrove could probably sell their products and do a pretty good job with it.' So I wrote a letter – I can remember sitting at my office desk in the old farm house in Lapeer, typing it on an IBM Selectric Anyway, I wrote this letter to Adrian, and I proposed to him that I become their marketing person for North America. I had no idea they already had a marketing person. I wanted to do it because I just loved what they did. I loved their plants.



"I never got a reply. But it was always in the back of my mind that at some point in time, maybe I could do something with Blooms."

Gary Doerr (right) with Blooms of Bressingham UK Trial manager Paul Gooderham.

"Well, eight or so years passed, it was now the early '90s, the business at Peppergrove had grown, we were in perennials at the right time and got lucky, and we were doing some pretty creative stuff, and one of the things we did was sponsor a PPA consumer event in Columbus, along with one of my customers, The Andersons in Maumee. Adrian Bloom was invited to headline the event.

"When Adrian was in Columbus, he was thinking about getting a bigger foot in the door in North America, and he was looking for a good perennial grower he could work with. He asked The Andersons for a recommendation, and they said Peppergrove. Which was nice; I think a lot of that had to do with the fact that we spent quite a bit of money to sponsor the event!

"So I met Adrian; he came by my booth. We had a color-coded marketing system that was innovative at the time, and he was pretty impressed by that. We talked, and it was decided that I'd come over to England and see him.

"The first time I tried to go to England, I forgot that I had to have a passport. Actually, I didn't know I had to have a passport. I'd made my flight reservation through a travel agent, and sometime after that they called and said you need a passport. I said 'Huh?' I'd been to Canada and never needed a passport, so I never thought about it. Didn't even know." [Gary had to delay his trip until his passport arrived, but he finally made it to England.]

"It took a couple of years to negotiate the contract with them, but in 1994 I became Blooms' marketing manager for North America. It was then that I realized I had only been thinking about north-central U.S. Now I had the tiger by the tail. What was I going to do with that?"

In 2004, Gary bought the Blooms of Bressingham new plant business (Blooms of Bressingham Plant Centres is owned by a UK investment group), so today he IS Blooms of Bressingham, headquartered in Sacramento, California. Adrian Bloom is still under contract as a consultant and spokesman. GT