

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Ever heard of Yoder Brothers Hot House Vegetable Company?

Chris Beytes

As a business name, Aris is just three and a half years old. But the company that Aris represents has 115 years of history, 112 of that under the Yoder family name—and the Yoder name still remains synonymous with floriculture in general and mums in particular (it's still the brand name for the mums and aster genetics that Yoder sold to Syngenta in 2008). Even though it has been superseded by Aris, Yoder is still a name worth exploring. And as it turns out, the family business has operated under several iterations of the Yoder name before culminating with Yoder Brothers. So we called a Yoder—G. Ramsey Yoder, chairman of the board for Aris—to rediscover the rich history of his family name.

C.Z. Yoder Farms

The Reverend Christian Zook Yoder was Ramsey's great-grandfather, a farmer and Mennonite minister from Wooster, Ohio. He stands out horticulturally for two reasons: First, he was one of the individuals responsible for the establishment of the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station in Wooster, having lobbied the community vigorously via his horse and buggy. Second, in 1896, he decided to build a couple of greenhouses at his farm in which to grow vegetables during the winter. "In that part of the state, it was called 'Yoder's Folly,' primarily because his fellow farmers thought you only grew crops when the sun shines and the temperature was warm," Ramsey says. "You didn't do it when there was snow on the ground. C.Z. actually saved the farm by having his seven sons build the greenhouses and grow lettuce," he added. "He paid for the debt on the farm in one or two years." The farm was inherited by John S. Yoder, the oldest son, and renamed J.S. Yoder and Sons Greenhouses. It now operates under the name of Cedar Lane Farms.



Yoder pioneers in the early 1940s. Second from left is M.S. Yoder. Fourth from left is Conrad Olson, long-time head pathologist and the man greatly responsible for developing virus indexing and heat therapy plant certification still in use today. Fifth from left is Bill Duffett, mum breeder.

Yoder Brothers Hot House Vegetable Company

While J.S. was running the family homestead, Ramsey's grandfather, Menno Simon Yoder, and a great uncle, Rufus Yoder, got an offer to run the greenhouses at the Anna Dean Farm in Barberton, Ohio. This farm was the vision of industrialist Ohio Columbus Barber, the Diamond Match King and chairman of the Goodrich Tire & Rubber Company (and also the founder of the town of Barberton, where Aris is still headquartered). Mr. Barber invested his fortune in building a 3,500-acre "scientific farm," applying all sorts of modern techniques to farming. The farm, named for his daughter and son-in-law, had the best livestock, a flour mill, creamery and more, plus 20 acres of state-of-the-art greenhouses for flowers, fruits and vegetables, which Menno and Rufus managed. The greenhouses were the largest in the world at the time.

At some point, Rufus decided to move to Lancaster, Ohio, where he started yet another family farm and greenhouse business. So another of Ramsey's great uncles, Ira Dewitt Yoder, joined Menno at the Anna Dean Farm.

Mr. Barber passed away in 1920, and in that year Menno and Ira bought the greenhouses from the estate, forming a partnership and naming the business Yoder Brothers Hot House Vegetable Company, the precursor to the Yoder Brothers we know. "They paid a little too much for those greenhouses," Ramsey says, "but they felt they knew enough about those greenhouses and the potential market from working for Barber that they could make a go of it."

Yoder Brothers, Inc.

Around 1930, the brothers started growing flowers, and they found them to be more profitable than vegetables. Cut chrysanthemums were coming on as a popular crop, and by the middle 1930s the Yoders had found a way to trick them into flowering year-round. "That's what really got the business going," Ramsey says. But during WWII, the government forced the Yoders out of flowers and back into veggies for the war effort. "We lost our shirt doing that." The mums were moved to Canada, where renowned horticulturist Cecil Delworth housed them until after the war, when Yoder retrieved the stock and restarted the mum business. It was also just after the war, in 1946, when the brothers incorporated as Yoder Brothers, Inc., dropping "Hot House Vegetables" from the name.

Aris

It was in 2008 when the Yoder family decided to sell their now-famous chrysanthemum (and aster) genetics, and with it the family name that had been associated with the business since those early days. We asked Ramsey to explain why.

"The [Yoder] name is synonymous with chrysanthemums," he answered, "and when we sold that part of the business to Syngenta, it was important on their part—and we thought it would be good from our standpoint, too—that the brand name went with the mums."

The other reason is that under the new company name, Aris (a Latin-derived name with “green” in its long roots), the company is engaged to bring the same focus to a new crop—as it did to mums under the Yoder name. In fact, even before the name change, Yoder had acquired perennial specialists Blooms of Bressingham and Green Leaf Enterprises. And they still carry a broad selection of other core crops through the Green Leaf Plants division of Aris, including TradeWinds Hibiscus and Keepsake Azaleas, which have a long history with the company as well.

Can the Aris name ever be as synonymous with perennials as the Yoder name is with mums? Probably not, Ramsey admits. However, “Our goal is to become the leading perennial provider in North America, and we are laying the groundwork for a strong international presence in Europe to continue to grow the business.”

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