GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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The Hole in the Doughnut

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As a 10-year-old in Bartlett, Illinois, Tom Halat set his life plan in motion by joining 4-H. His parents didn't farm and he envied the other members of the club who were farmers. When he was a sophomore in high school, he turned his envy into satisfaction and borrowed money from the local bank, rented a farm and raised vegetables, corn and soybeans. He sold his harvest at a farm stand that is still in business. In 2011, Tom celebrated 50 years of living out his boyhood dream.

Tom majored in plant and soil science at Southern Illinois University where he met the woman who became his wife. He and Cheryl ran the Bartlett farm stand and rented land until 1976 when they purchased additional acreage. They grew only veggies until customers requested flowers.

Tom Halat, own



er of Tom's Farm Market & Greenhouses in Huntley, Illinois, was one of the first growers featured when "Under an Acre" debuted in 1985. There's Tom in '85 (left) and Tom today (above).

Tom was one of the featured growers interviewed by Vic Ball in *GrowerTalks'* debut of "Under an Acre" in November 1985. At that time, Tom's Vegetable Market was known for its sweet corn and, 50 years later, Tom's Farm Market and Greenhouses continues to claim sweet corn as one of its most popular draws.

Tom has a 240-acre farm in Huntley, Illinois, 55 miles northwest of Chicago and 25 miles from the Bartlett farm stand. The Huntley location includes the retail areas and the greenhouses.

"In 1976, there was no development [in the area]; there were 750 people and no towns within 10 miles and farms all around. The development boom came and now my farm is surrounded on four sides by houses. We

are the hole in the doughnut—we say we're the first farm west of Chicago," Tom says.

The Bartlett farm stand is open from mid-July to mid-October. "Bartlett is established. We sell more there than in the giant greenhouse [in Huntley]," Tom says. His daughters, Mary and Liz, work in various capacities in the business, as do their husbands. Tom's son, Jeff, is a grain farmer. The greatest loss was felt by Cheryl's passing three years ago. Tom says, "Cheryl was an integral part of the business. She seeded, transplanted and finished pots, and took care of the produce and greenhouse production. Her favorite things were retail and talking to people. She always had time to talk."

In 1970, the original production area was 3,000 sq. ft.; in 1980 it was expanded to 10,500 sq. ft.; and since 2004, the production space has been 80,000 sq. ft. The retail store, bakery, café, produce prep room and gift shop cover 17,000 sq. ft. The Huntley retail store is open April 1 to December 30. They host a month-long Fall Festival that one year included an elaborately-designed 7-acre corn maze featuring their dog Susie.

Christmas is not as big of an event. Tom says sales are minimal. "The box stores are killing us in Northern Illinois. We'll continue to do Christmas because the high-end gift shop does well with unique baby clothes, jewelry, watches, seasonal earrings and ornaments, but we delete something once the box stores sell it," he adds.

"We once thought that we were unique as a family-owned farm market with produce and more, but it's not true. We conceded about three years ago that box stores do hurt us. Prior to that, we were immune. We're fortunate with the bakery, café and gift shop sales increasing, which don't make up for the loss of garden center [sales], but helps with the overall picture," says Tom. Huntley's residents number around 22,000. "We draw from less than a 10-mile area for the garden center season. There is so much competition—we're not a destination," says Tom.

There are nine full-time year-round employees, five of whom are family members; there are eight full-time seasonal employees and 40 seasonal part-time employees. Tom's business breakdown is 95% retail and 5% wholesale. He grows annuals for a number of landscapers and school fundraisers.

"We grow asparagus to zucchini, but we don't grow everything. We don't grow root crops. We buy in the shrubs, grow all the annuals by seeds or propagation, and buy in 2/3 of the perennials," Tom says. He goes to Chicago twice a week to buy fruit like Michigan apples and peaches, and California grapes, cherries and nectarines. Tom grows 3 acres of strawberries that they harvest and sell and, of course, the sweet corn. "We stopped selling trees about four years ago. No one was buying them due to the box stores selling them. Container shrubs, flowering shrubs and hanging baskets are what we sell," says Tom.

> **Tom's money-saving ideas:**
> • Watch labor costs.
> • Control end-of-season shrink of discarded plants.

> **How the business has changed from 1985:**
> • "We hand-seeded in open flats, then hand-transplanted into 12-0-6s. Twenty years ago we

> purchased a Blackmore seeder. Three years ago, we went one step further by adding attachments to the Blackmore seeder. Next up was a Tagawa semi-automatic transplanter, although, as we had increased in automation of flat material, flat sales had diminished."
> • "Ten years ago we sold 25,000 flats and now we sell 9,000 flats. Customers don't want to get down on their knees and get dirty. The [desired plant] is constantly changing. We've tried everything as years go by to see what customers want. They want to take home a finished product."

Some things never change:

"In 1970, the only plant in 4½-in. pots was 1,000 geraniums. Today we sell 60,000 4½-in. annuals like Proven Winners, but the consistent seller is still geraniums." **GT**

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