GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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The Teacher Becomes the Student

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Once a teacher, always a teacher … but instead of teaching algorithms and cosines, diphthongs and gerunds, Alice Doyle is teaching the world about scions and rootstock with grafted plants like peppers, eggplants and tomatoes, like the Mighty 'Mato.

In 1990, when Julie A. Martens featured Alice Doyle and Greg Lee in Under an Acre, they'd been in business for 15 years as Log House Plants, named for the now 83-year-old log house on the property. Twenty miles from Eugene, Oregon, in Cottage Grove, Log House Plants operates on 12 acres of the 60-acre farm.

Alice and Greg met in college, taught after college, quit their jobs and built a greenhouse. Nearly every year they add another greenhouse—they're up to 26.

"It's a wonderful career," says Alice. "The business is pretty stable and the output has been increasing 20% every year."



Greg Lee and Alice Doyle, owners of Log House Plants in Cottage Grove, Oregon, were featured in GrowerTalks 22 years ago. Since then, they have a total of 26 greenhouses and added grafted vegetables to their product offering—including the Mighty 'Mato grafted tomatoes.

As wholesale growers, Alice and Greg approach their work with a fervor they hope passes through their retailers to the gardeners. Alice and Greg assemble retail display units that tell stories with plants to help gardeners with their selections.

In 1986, they created "Grow to Know the World" in celebration of the United Nation's International Year of Peace. Alice says, "We grew 50 different container combinations of flowers, vegetables and herbs from places like Spain, India and even the Pacific Northwest."

Other guides include in-house designed and laminated posters of specific categories: sweet potatoes, vegetables, annual cut flowers and annual dryable flowers—with the intent of educating customers and broadening their plant knowledge. In 1997, Alice and Greg developed the Fall and Winter Vegetable program, which taught gardeners how to plant certain varieties in July, August and September to harvest throughout the winter.

“It’s an adventure with the accounts and an adventure with the garden population,” Alice says. “The goal is to make [the retailers] different than the chain stores.” Every year Alice and Greg have increased their plant list with new categories. They research varieties that grow well in the climate of the Pacific Northwest. “Customers want to garden with certain things and we listen to them,” she says.

Log House Plants has a staff of approximately 35 people, which includes “overqualified” team members who have been with them for decades. Alice says she and Greg complement one another well. “Greg is the grower and takes care of the bank; I grow new varieties and take care of the people and the network of connections to propel us forward,” she adds.

During a trip to Crete in 2000, Alice saw grafted plants for the first time. “They grafted the wild rootstock on to the scion, and without drenching it with chemicals, put it in infested soil (root-knot nematode) to make it tolerant,” she says. In 2005, Alice judged the Kolkata Flower Show. During the trip, she traveled through 2,000 acres in the “breadbasket” of Pakistan. The area growers showed Alice the rootstock for grafting. When she returned to Oregon, she researched grafting in the area and discovered that for years they had been eating grafted fruit from British Columbia.

After further reading and researching in 2009, Alice and Greg learned to graft vegetables and the processes of healing and acclimatization—all by trial and error. Scheduling the scion and the rootstock to be the exact same size and diameter was complicated.

“We graft our favorite varieties chosen for taste with rootstock that makes them super-plants, and then place the plant in the dark and in 85% humidity at 75 to 80 degrees for three days. Without stress, the new plant remaps and reconnects its vascular tissue. We bring it out of the dark and over another three-day period, wean it out of the high humidity and heat,” Alice says. “Log House Plants worked with breeders in Holland to source and trial the best rootstocks for tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and cucumbers. This year we grafted over 65 varieties of hybrid and heirloom tomatoes.”

The grafted plants are tough, since they are resistant to cold, heat, pests and disease, and in the fall they are still yielding fruit, she adds. In fact, one grafted plant yielded 80 tomatoes.

In 2010, Alice and Greg sent the grafted tomato plants to 30 of their accounts in California. “They were so excited about the grafted tomatoes that they took out an ad in the *Los Angeles Times*. We received tremendous input from customers about their yields,” Alice says.

Log House Plants’ Mighty ‘Mato grafted tomato plants trialed for three years in home gardens with positive response and success. They’ve partnered with Burpee Home Gardens, Territorial Seed, SuperNaturals and Plug Connection. The latter has sold almost 500,000 grafted plants.

One billion grafted veggies were grown last year in places such as Korea, Japan, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand. Grafted plants use fewer chemicals and do not involve GMOs. Alice's goals are to have consumers become conscious of the problem, to learn about the food they consume and to have companies label GMOs in food.

Tips from the teacher on caring for grafted plants:

• Keep the graft above the soil or the scion will root in.
• Always cage, trellis or rope the tomato plant off the ground, so the scion doesn't root in.
• Prune. Take off the suckers that come out at each leaf and trunk junction.
• Don't plant the grafted tomato plant in a container unless it's as large as an oak wine barrel.

Tips for growers (and non-growers!):

• See what's special in your area.
• Don't expect to see run-of-the-mill. Diversity attracts clientele and creates distinction.
• Keep life interesting. Follow your bliss.

Visit their website at www.loghouseplants.com. **GT**

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