

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Penny's Pinching Produces Profits

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More than 30 years ago when Penny Price was an employee at Harvey's Florist and Greenhouse in Frostburg, Maryland, she was advised the items that fell on the floor were lost revenue for the owner. Penny heeded the advice and put it to use when she purchased the business in 1983. Now, her grower, Bernie Miltenberger, calls her frugal. But in this economy, frugality is a necessity.

That goes for the customers, too, when staycations are the norm, college kids have only one credit card and the retirees are on fixed incomes.

"In the spring, the gas prices go up, the food prices go up and the water prices go up," says Bernie. That puts flowers in the want-but-don't-need category since the gas to get to the greenhouse and the water to take care of the flowers are more expensive. "Since we're in a niche market, we'll survive," says Bernie.

Harvey's Florist and Greenhouse—these days Harvey's Florist and Greenhouses (plural)—has survived and has been in business since 1930 as a cut flower operation, when flowers didn't travel the distances they do now. Under Penny and Bernie's direction, the business has evolved into a florist, a gift shop and three greenhouses for growing. They're in the process of adding a nutritional health care line to their merchandise.

"We have older folks who want to keep their independence through nutrition," says Bernie. Harvey's offers products like virgin coconut oil, Sunwarrior protein, stevia, aloe vera juice and deodorant sprays.

Frostburg is located in western Maryland at a 2,500 ft. elevation in the Allegheny Mountains. At that elevation, snow can come early and stay late, and the summer temperatures don't get above 79F. Just 9 miles to the east is Cumberland; at a 600 ft. elevation, it warms up into the 80s. The Frostburg population of approximately 9,000 people increases every autumn when 5,000 students start classes at the state university.

"The town is growing; what's nice about Frostburg is that there is a new influx of people every year," says Bernie.



*nny Price of Harvey's Florist and Greenhouses in Frostburg, Maryland, was interviewed by **GrowerTalks** for Under an Acre in 1990. Since then, the business has evolved into a florist, a gift shop and three greenhouses for growing.*

Pe

nny Price today, and her head grower Bernie Miltenberger

Bernie started growing peppers and tomatoes in his grandmother's greenhouse; now as the grower at Harvey's, he does the yearly plant selection, the seeding and cutting, buys-in the Easter lilies, takes care of the coal furnace, helps with accounts receivable and payroll and more. Bernie has been at Harvey's since 1990, the same year that Penny was interviewed by Julie A. Martens for Under an Acre. At the time, Penny said, "We can't compete with department stores on price, but we can sell service." That still holds true today.

"Our customer service is good and is not suffering [because of the economy]," says Bernie. There are four employees in addition to Penny and Bernie. "We haven't laid anyone off," says Bernie. It's another result of "Penny-pinching."

"She does work herself after hours to keep labor hours down to a minimum," adds Bernie.

"We are in the emotions business; we design and sell products to make an impact or a wow factor for an event, holiday or special occasion," says Bernie, whose day can consist of a bouquet delivery, a cake decoration and a delivery of flowers to a funeral home. "We pride ourselves on providing a trustworthy service with a 24-hour guarantee on our product or service. The satisfaction of growing and creating themes, color patterns and emotional delights for our customers is very rewarding to Penny, myself and the employees," he adds.

The greenhouse is in operation 365 days a year. "As a kid working on a dairy farm, we were up at 5:00 a.m. to milk the cows, and then we picked corn. The next day we had to do it all over again," says Bernie. "You have to have passion ... I'm blessed. That's the nice thing about this business—growing clicks with me and I enjoy every minute of it."

Thoughts and tips from Bernie:

- "Every day brings a curve ball. I like a good challenge; I like a change in the product mix or the day or the industry. I just wish the economy was better."
- "The market has to understand that we're overproducing. Those days of selling everything are gone. Watch the quantity and don't sell second-rate stuff. If you grow too much, know your market; use the spreadsheet for historical analysis."
- "Value yourself and your work; love your family."
- "Be smart; make a profit. Don't just turn over money. Love the business."

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