

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Trip Report: The City of Saints Scrapbook

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First, a special “merci beaucoup” to Ball regional sales director Yves Cournoyer and sales rep Jacques Mallette for being my translators. Many of the growers we visited were more comfortable speaking in their native tongue, so Yves and Jacques got to see what it was like being a journalist for a few days. And listening to the beautiful French language was a good trade-off.

pictured: Ball salesmen Yves Cournoyer (left) and Jacques Mallette pose in the middle of the Marché Atwater, with downtown Montréal in the background.

Jacques Barbe Les Serres, Saint-Eustache

Jacques Barbe and his wife Linda have been in the growing business for 34 years; the last 15 have been spent expanding their retail business. When they first started, their wholesale operation was surrounded by farmland. Now they find themselves in the middle of suburbia, so going into retail made sense. Jacques said that in his heart, he's more wholesale, but he's becoming a garden center convert.

“Retail is more motivating because you have the customer in front of you every day; you get instant feedback from people,” said Jacques. “You don't get that in wholesale.” But he continued on to say he likes doing both because he knows exactly what works for his customers and can tailor his business to accommodate them.

Even after a tornado came through in late May, Jacques said this season was one of the best he's had in a while. The only shadow was cold weather at the end of April. Other than that, Jacques said he enjoyed empty benches.



Left: Earlier this year, Jacques built walls around his checkout area, which provides more protection for his customers and additional space for the holiday season. During peak, he has eight cashiers working to ensure there are only two carts in line at a time.

Center: About four years ago, the Barbés opened a giftware area, which Jacques said is doing well. He offers a wide price range—"A lot of people make the mistake of getting rid of the cheap stuff," said Jacques. "You have to have everything."

Right: This year, Jacques added faux flowers to his gift area because some customers were asking for them. Can you tell which flowers are fake and which are the real deal?

Pépinière La Pointe, Mascouche

The land on which François La Pointe's Botanix garden center currently resides has been in his family for generations. Thirty-two years ago, it was a cattle ranch owned by his father. François carved out 15 acres for himself to grow greenhouse cucumbers and now has 120,000 sq. ft. of production and retail.

François still has some of the original greenhouses on the property from when he started. He says he likes the old houses because he knows them—and knows where the hot and cold spots are ... kind of like an old friend.

Everything that's grown is for the garden center; François doesn't do wholesale. But he has some automation like a medium-sized wholesale grower because he produces a wide berth of products. From the core crops like geraniums and impatiens to herbs, vegetables and tropicals, visitors really have tons to choose from.



Left: François La Pointe shows off his popular 6-pack herb combo. Herbs and vegetables make up more than 15% of his business

Center: François sells much of his tropical and foliage plants under the Deco Style brand from Agri-Starts. He says any product he sells in branded packaging goes quickly because his customers notice them before the ones in generic containers.

Right: François' staff custom designs and plants most of the combinations, all in decorative 14-in. containers. He does grow some pre-mixed multi-liner programs, but his own combos sell better—about 3,000 of them a year.



Les Serres René et Martine Dauphinais, Saint-Hubert

We visited another husband and wife-owned grower/retailer who have been running their business for 34 years. Fourteen years ago, they moved to their current location in Saint-Hubert and maintain a total of 140,000 sq. ft. of production and retail space. René and Martine were not there when we stopped by, but their daughter Valerie was able to show us around their expansive garden center.

pictured: Like many growers in the area, the Dauphinais' grow in Styrofoam flats. Yves said it's a "very Montréal" thing to do. That's Valerie smiling with her marigolds and alyssum.

Valerie said that this spring was the best in the 14 years they've been at this location, selling out of much of their product. And because they grow their own plants, they can keep everything at the right price, she explained.

They also sell a lot of novelty items that you can't find anywhere else. Not only do they offer 56 different varieties of tomatoes (3,000 total plants), but Valerie—who's in charge of product selection—says she likes to try new things to see how her customers react with plants like calocephalus, Snowbush breyina and amaranthus.



Left: Les Serres Dauphinais offers a lot of plants you can't find anywhere else, like this amaranthus.

Center: Valerie said they sell a lot of perennials in different containers at different price points. In order to make it more clear for the customers, they created this board that shows the pricing for each perennial container.

Right: After a visit to the Gardens at Ball, René and Martine were inspired to create their own "Skyframe" at the entrance to their garden center.

Marché Atwater, Montréal

Besides Les Serres Riel, there were other growers we visited during our walk through the market. Many of the

vendors choose to specialize in a particular type of crop to stand out—especially since there are so many booths offering plants and flowers. For example, there are some who sell just herbs and veggies or just houseplants and foliage in order to compete with the ones who sell everything. This is how you earn people's trust and retain loyalty, explained Yves. "[Customers think], 'why would I buy vegetables from someone who grows flowers? I'll go to the expert.'"

We didn't have time to visit them all, but the ones we did speak to have similar mantras when it comes to serving the people who visit the market: excel at customer service and provide the best quality. **GT**



Les Serres Y.G. Pinsonneault is one of many flower and plant vendors at the Marché Atwater.

New to the market and the industry, Pure Horticulture focuses on using organic fertilizer and biological pest management in production—hence the name "Pure."