

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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A History of Growing

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It was in historic Red Wing, southeast of Minneapolis-St. Paul, where Carl Hallstrom chose to settle in the late 1800s. He came from Michigan to the industrious town to grow vegetables and raise cows, and in 1886 he started a greenhouse business next to the Mississippi River.

One hundred years later, Carl's grandson, Evan, and great-grandson, Dave, were interviewed by Russell Miller for "Under an Acre." At the time, Minnesota was experiencing a heat wave that had everyone taking extra precautions in the greenhouses.

Today, Dave and his wife, Diane, are the fourth generation to run Hallstrom's Florist and Greenhouses. Evan passed away two years ago at the age of 90. His wife, Carol, who will be 84 on her next birthday, still comes to work every day to do odd jobs. The customers expect to see her. Her home, as well as Dave and Diane's home, is on the greenhouse property.

"The greenhouse was their whole lives" at all hours of the day, Dave said about his family.

"At the time, the furnaces burned coal," says Dave. Diane adds, "Both Dave's parents and Dave and I had loud alarms go off if the heat went below a certain degree. The alarm was always in the middle of the night, it was never at 7:00 p.m." Now there's a phone alarm and the heating system is natural gas.

With two locations, it's taken up all of the younger Hallstroms' lives. Diane manages the floral shop in the downtown Red Wing location and Dave oversees the greenhouses in their other location. The floral shop is open year-round, while the greenhouses close after Christmas and re-open in March.

"In 2001, we opened a two-story, 4,000 sq. ft. retail space. In 2007, we added a hand-dipped ice cream and candy store," says Diane. "[Dave and I] were born and raised here. We love the town; it's an historic town. I remember Sundays—if I was good, my father let me get ice cream after church at a drug store that had a soda fountain with big seats. So Dave and I thought, 'What doesn't this town have?'"

"Many downtown retailers have turned into service businesses," says Dave. "The downtown relies on tourism.

We decided to try something different with the ice cream store.”

The greenhouses are on a total of 30 acres surrounded by residences outside of town. “Fifteen years ago, we developed 20 acres into housing. Now the greenhouses are on 10 acres,” says Dave. Over the years, Hallstrom’s has undergone many remodels, including the largest expansion in 1989 when they tore down and replaced glass houses with 12,000-sq. ft. gutter-connected houses and five Quonset huts. “We upgraded everything, including the installation of a natural gas unit heater,” says Dave.

Hallstrom’s is a perpetual grower of the moss hanging baskets and geraniums for the city of Red Wing; they partner with another grower on the hanging baskets that adorn the city. Hallstrom’s wholesales bedding plants in the spring for garden centers and landscapers, and works with local non-profits on fundraisers.

“Red Wing is known for its moss flower baskets. The project was initiated by local photographers from Vancouver. In the beginning, there were 12 hanging baskets; now there are 230 16-in. hanging baskets,” says Dave. Hallstrom’s makes deliveries for the florist and the greenhouse within a 60-mile radius. They grow baskets for other towns and states, which the clients pick up. There are two full-time employees in the greenhouse and 10 seasonal employees. Between the two locations, there are 23 employees who rotate shifts.

Production begins in February and ramps up at the end of April and beginning of May. “Our primary rotation is bedding plants; we do 50,000 annuals, 5,000 1-gal. perennials, hanging baskets, fall garden mums, tropicals and supplement cut flowers for the floral shop. We don’t do much propagation; we buy rooted cuttings and seedlings and finish in the greenhouse,” says Dave. At the downtown location, they have walk-in traffic and additional customers come from the FTD and Teleflora services.

“We’re a destination; we have the biggest selection around with more unique items,” says Dave. “We have 14 -in. moss baskets and 10-in., 11-in., and 16-in. combo baskets; we offer many different combinations of annuals and cylindrical plants,” he adds. Red Wing has added retirement homes and condominiums and the residents are dependent on hanging baskets, patio pots and container gardens. They need convenience. “Peoples’ lifestyles are busy, both the husband and wife are working,” says Dave.

“And with the price of gas, more and more people are staying home and fixing up their yards and homes,” says Diane. “Our biggest competitor that affects sales is the weather,” says Dave.

Will Dave continue to work until he’s 90 like his father? Diane says, “He’ll retire at a minimum of ...” “Seventy-five,” says Dave.

Tips for other growers:

“Diversify and get out of the box. It’s an odd combo [garden center and ice cream shop], but it’s worked well. We’re one block off of Main Street. Red Wing is on the Mississippi River with active train and bus depots, the St. James Hotel, the river boats and lots of tourists.” **GT**