

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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From Mums to Marigolds

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The inspiration for Groth's Gardens began with a family visit to a dentist office. Owner Deb Groth was looking for an additional source of income that would be used to put her two children, Amanda and Chris, through college.

"I picked up this magazine and there was an article in there about a family [here] in Iowa who were growing field-grown mums to raise money for college for the kids and I thought that's something I could do," Deb explains.

It was the early '90s—an ideal time to launch into a new business. And so, after a conversation with their local extension service, Deb purchased and planted 500 mums.

"We crawled on our hands and knees to plant them using little sticks to help measure the spacing," says Deb. "It's pretty funny when you think back on it."

Despite a huge flood in Des Moines, which restricted access to the farm, the first year was a success, with only 35 mums remaining. And so, the next year, Groth's Gardens doubled production, planting and harvesting of 1,000 mums.

The success continued with customers not only coming for the mums, but beginning to inquire about other plants for their gardens, including perennials from the family beds.

"A lot of the plants were handed down to us by family and we didn't want to dig them up," Deb says. "So I thought, well, let's see if we can figure out how to grow perennials."

However, it was the conversation with their extension representative that helped ensure that Groth's Gardens was on the right path. Located 25 miles southwest of Des Moines, Iowa, the Groth family was well known to the local community. Deb's husband Marvin raises cattle, while Deb taught at the local school. Despite their familiarity with the locals in their small community of Winterset, the extension representative stressed that their

market focus should be Des Moines.

“He said, ‘I will tell you right now—throw your energy towards Des Moines,’” says Deb. “Your hometown, your local people, are not going to support you for a while.”

To attract the Des Moines community, Deb created a venue that not only sold plants, but became a destination offering quality plants, the beauty of a farm environment and an education.

“You have to give people more than what they’ve bargained for,” says Deb. “Container gardening is our big thing now; we have really honed into the specialty annuals.”

Today, Groth’s Gardens grows 90% of what they sell, including all of their own annuals and mums. The mums are still grown in the field on drip irrigation; however, they’ve decreased to growing only two sizes of products—12 in. and 8 in.

“I love growing lots of different things and I do think people like to see what’s new and different,” Deb says. “But there’s a fine line where you can just overwhelm your customers with choices and they don’t know what to pick.”

When choosing the next year’s production, Deb considers both the current trends and what her customer base has responded to in the past. It’s about listening to the needs of the community and providing the quality plants that will respond to this. One of the advantages of being smaller, shares Deb, is that it’s easy to shift the focus of the operation. In fact, for the next growing season, Deb has decided to focus exclusively on perennials, annuals and mums, and will no longer invest in selling roses and shrubs.

“The customers want their annuals first and then their perennials,” says Deb. “But we found that we weren’t really moving the numbers when it came to the nursery stock.”

The family also has made the business decision to close for the summer, reopening at the end of August in time for the fall. Closing for the summer marks a major business change for Groth’s Gardens—and one that Deb is cautious about.

“We don’t want people to think, ‘Oh they are starting to retire,’” says Deb. “Because we are not; our health is really good and we love what we do.”

Their children, the reason that Groth’s Gardens opened initially, were an integral part of the business success. Throughout the years, both children have helped their parents with the business, recognizing that the profit was going to be used to pay for their college. Today, Chris, who is a doctor, and Amanda, who pursued a degree in horticulture, have zero college debt.

Deb’s husband Marvin continues to help behind the scenes with the maintenance and some of the planting.

“He likes to be called a farmer,” says Deb. “Usually he is working with the cattle and such, but he helps with the planting, is an excellent sounding board and helps keep me grounded.”

Overall, Deb's goal continues to be to provide quality plants and an education that will empower her customers to be successful. This begins with purchasing the best plant genetics and then sharing with the customers the importance of creating the right environment for the plant. For the last four years, Groth's Gardens has provided hanging baskets for their local community. These beautiful plants have helped educate the community that it all it takes to grow beautiful blooms is a loving hand. Deb also tries to share with her customers the importance of adapting to the changes in the season.

"What works in May doesn't necessarily work in July," says Deb. "It's fun to get people more in tune with their planting." Her mission, shares Deb, is to provide people with happiness—happiness that comes from growing quality plants. **GT**

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