

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Lessons Learned from a Polka-Dotted Poinsettia

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For horticulturists Judy and Jim Mitchell, their journey to owner and operator of Mitchell's Nursery & Greenhouse in King, North Carolina, was one interwoven with challenges. But despite it all, or perhaps because of them, the couple persevered, using their experience to establish the foundation for a thriving business.

Judy's optimistic outlook is nicely illustrated through her accidental creation of a batch of polka-dotted poinsettias. As a young woman, Judy had taken a position with a greenhouse start-up business, where she sourced and grew poinsettias and bedding plants. It was a steep learning curve—especially for a new graduate—but Judy stuck with it, connecting with both

her professors and colleagues for advice.

"One of the funniest situations happened when I was spraying hanging baskets," said Judy. "The poinsettias were under the baskets and I failed to consider the potential impact that the spray would have on them. Well, they ended up with polka dots."

This was before the whole glitter phase, shared Judy, but they were still able to market and sell this unique batch.

Judy and Jim met at North Carolina State University, where they both were pursuing horticultural degrees. Initially, Judy dreamed of working at a large garden where she would work directly with the flowers and plants, while Jim envisioned a future where he would own and operate his own nursery.

As a young teenager, Jim transformed a sand pile at his home into a rooting bed for azaleas. He shared his love of azaleas with Judy and the couple worked together in their spare hours to develop their own azalea crop.

"We started to grow azaleas while in school and sold them at the local farmer markets on the weekend," said Judy. "We would get gallon cans from the local elementary school cafeteria, punch holes in them and then use them to grow azaleas."

Upon graduation, Jim began working for the Department of Agriculture as a pesticide inspector, while Judy took to

learning the ins and outs of the industry working for a start-up business.

To increase efficiencies, Judy kept detailed notes. The tracking provided Judy with insights on which crops were profitable and which weren't worth the investment.

"One thing I struggled with were Easter lilies. I did exactly what the book said, but they bloomed the week after Easter," said Judy. "Later, the sales person informed me that the bulbs were immature. I vowed to never grow Easter lilies again; I will leave that challenge to someone else."

Despite her diligence, Judy's career path was about to shift.

"One day, I went into the operation and my notes were missing," said Judy. When Judy inquired about her missing records, she was advised that her services were no longer required. "The owner's son-in-law was looking for a job and so I was replaced," she said. On a positive note, this experience would be invaluable for expanding their azalea rooting bed into a full-fledged nursery.

A month later, Judy discovered that she was pregnant. With a new child on the way, the couple needed to maintain a stable income. And so, to help make ends meet, Judy did some substitute teaching at the local elementary school and junior college.

"My siblings are all teachers and my father always wanted me to be a teacher," said Judy. "Teaching is hard; I have so much respect for people that take on this job full time."

Two years after their son Jay was born, life threw another curveball at the couple. Jim has epilepsy and his seizures had become significantly worse. He was unable to drive and continue with his current job.

"He was averaging one seizure a day and so he couldn't be left alone," said Judy. Judy now had to balance being the primary caregiver for her husband and son with generating enough income for their family. The azaleas, which were still doing well at the farmers market, weren't enough to sustain their home. To make ends meet, the couple helped a local business maintain their trees, shrubs and lawn, and took other small jobs that came their way.

Back at home, the couple was beginning to outgrow their space for their own fledging nursery, so they begin the search for a new location.

"We moved to the other location in '93 and we opened our business whenever I wasn't completing jobs for other clients," said Judy.

Thankfully, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. In 1995, Jim underwent a successful surgery to reduce his seizures.

"He had three seizures shortly after his surgery, but nothing more than that," Judy recalled. With Jim's epilepsy under control, it was time for the Mitchell family to put their dream into action.

Initially, they'd purchased two Quonset huts, each 30 ft. by 96 ft., thinking that was all the space they would ever need. They were wrong. In 1996, the Mitchell family introduced poinsettias into their growing operation to have a crop they could sell in the winter. They began small, selling to churches and inviting the public in for seasonal open houses. However, the Mitchells were very interested in poinsettia trials, both for the challenge and opportunity they presented.

"Unnamed poinsettias give you free publicity; people get excited when they see so many different poinsettias," said Judy. "We had 37 varieties the first year, including the trial varieties."

Introducing poinsettias helped take their business to the next level, eventually expanding to seven bays, all of which

are gutter connected. This year, Mitchell's Nursery & Greenhouse is growing 80 varieties, including seven unnamed varieties.

"When you have so many varieties growing under the same roof, it's a challenge," said Judy. "But I love it. I never get bored."

Their client base continues to be a mixture of retail and wholesale customers. Although poinsettias are a highly competitive market, their operation differentiates itself through their varieties and quality products. However, it's their continual effort in marketing that urges people to walk through their door.

"They are not just going to come in and buy them," said Judy. "You need to contact them, send letters to the churches, cater to the florists, hold open houses—anything that gets customers into your store." Once through the doors, the stunning array of product speaks for itself.

"The poinsettia is the one plant that really makes me stand in awe, especially when I see all of the varieties flourishing together," said Judy. "Other plants I enjoy, but poinsettias are the most challenging, which makes it that much more rewarding when you see the finished product."

When asked if there have been any other experiences with polka-dotted poinsettias, Judy laughed and said, "Only the ones that were done on purpose." **GT**

Pictured: Judy and Jim Mitchell with their son Jay (left), owners of Mitchell's Nursery & Greenhouse in King, North Carolina.

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