GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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The Land of Fire, Ice & Fresh Tomatoes

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When I embarked on my study abroad trip to Iceland, in many ways it felt like journeying to another planet. The country is covered in otherworldly rock formations: red pumice that looks like the surface of Mars, flaky black remnants of past volcanic eruptions and gray basalt worn smooth by centuries of glacial movement. While Iceland looked a bit like outer space to me at first glance, the longer I was in the country the more I felt like I was getting a glimpse into the future—a bright, eco-friendly future where everything is recycled (there are bins on every street corner where people can dispose of their pre-sorted paper, glass, metal and food waste) and almost all of the energy used is from renewable sources.

Even the food production sector in Iceland seemed futuristic to me; the highlight of my trip was visiting Fridheimar Greenhouses and seeing how they grow delicious vegetables, flowers and herbs year-round in a freezing country (with minimal environmental impacts and a tiny carbon footprint!) by utilizing the power of geothermals to heat and light their greenhouses. They're a great example of how controlled environment agriculture, while typically very expensive, can still be profitable with creative inputs and the incorporation of agritourism.

Stepping from the gray cold of outdoors in Reykholt, Iceland, into the bright green warmth of Fridheimar was nothing short of magical. Just inside the door I was immediately greeted by cheerful potted geraniums before walking into the main growing area lined with rows of staked tomato plants stretching farther overhead than I could reach. The tour guide for my group was one of the company's founders, Mr. Knutur, a warm, quiet man who spoke with a charming touch of an Icelandic accent. He explained how he and his wife Helena had both earned agricultural degrees at the university and dreamed of running a greenhouse together. In 1995, the couple purchased the current growing facilities, which had been built in the 1940s and required extensive repairs to become usable. While their original goal was growing vegetables, around two decades ago the couple decided to expand their business by opening a horse stable adjacent to their greenhouse to showcase Icelandic horses to tourists passing through the area. Eighteen years after opening to the public, Fridheimar Greenhouses have surpassed the horse stables in popularity, garnering about 300,000 visitors a year.

Helena, Knutur and their five adult children (who are all currently involved in the business) grow around 10 different varieties of tomatoes from seed, along with basil, lettuce, cucumbers and geraniums. The tomatoes are grown on vertical structures to maximize space and streamline pruning and harvesting. They receive 14 to 17 hours per day of

supplemental lighting and are grown without any pesticide usage—beneficial insects are used for pest control instead.

While the facilities themselves are beautiful and the employees are cheerful and patient, the cherry tomato on top of the Fridheimar experience is the restaurant nestled in one corner of the greenhouse. Their signature dish is tangy, slightly spicy tomato soup, served up by the steaming gallon for hungry visitors alongside piles of freshly baked bread with butter and homemade cucumber salsa. Each table in the restaurant has a basil plant for a centerpiece, from which visitors can pluck fresh leaves to add to their soup. Other signature menu offerings, all made in-house, include tomato beer, Bloody Marys and even tomato gelato!

My magical visit to Fridheimar was not only my favorite part of my trip to Iceland, it also gave me hope about the future of horticulture in the United States. The green industry is always facing challenges—from supply chain issues and extreme weather conditions to trade restrictions, tariffs and labor struggles. However, one of the things that makes our industry great is how we always manage to overcome these challenges. It was so inspiring to see how Helena, Knutur and their family have been able to combine creativity, ingenuity and hard work at Fridheimar to build a successful business that's thriving despite its harsh surroundings. **GT**

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