

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Micky's Minis: A big little idea

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It was 21 years ago that the tiny plants known as Micky's Minis hit the national market, and today the St. Louis, Missouri, business part of N.G. Heimos Greenhouses, is still producing the cuddly miniature potted plants. *GrowerTalks* stopped by in early June to learn a little bit more from Business Manager Bill Byland, husband of Micky, the company's namesake.

The Heimos family began growing miniature plants in the late 1980s, but they weren't sure how to take the concept to the next level. Son-in-law Bill was brought on board to run the new division. With his MBA in marketing and sales, it was an ideal fit.

They chose the name "Micky's Minis" because there was an actual Micky, and because they thought the name had a nice ring to it. Their first nationwide shipments went out in 1990. "We've been building ever since," Bill says.

Originally, Micky's Minis were in 1 in. pots, but the competition began offering their own versions of "minis" in 2 in., 2 1/2 in. and 3 in. pots. "So we decided to offer a 2 in. and a 1 in.," Bill recalls. "The 1 in. needed a water reservoir all the time to make it work, and the pricing wasn't much different [than a 2 in.], so this is the size that really took off." They do 2 in. pots (5.5 cm, actually) exclusively now.

The potting medium is a custom-formed Oasis foam, which Bill says lends itself to shipping via FedEx, UPS or U.S. mail. Because of that, Micky's Minis want to focus even more on internet sales (www.mickysminis.org). Most sales are still to supermarkets and independents.

We asked Bill how mini plants have fared in the recession.

"We have been hit by the recession a little bit, too," he admitted. "It's a real competitive market out there. We thought we were well positioned going into the recession, because 80% of our products are under \$4.99 retail. But what happens is, 4 in. sizes in particular are priced pretty comparable to us. Our value is when a 4 in. isn't appropriate, when it's too big. We are trying to keep that position and add incremental sales for our

retailers, not take sales away from 4 in.”

Volume has been as high as about 1 million pots; currently they’re down to 700,000 to 800,000 per year.

But the product remains unique—perfect for party favors, window sills, and teacher gifts—and many competitors who dabbled in minis got out once they found how challenging they are to produce. Bill and company have stuck with it, and for his efforts Bill was named the Produce Marketing Association’s 2010 Floral Marketer of the Year. That for a tiny product in a country where “bigger is better.” How does he plan to continue to convince customers that small is beautiful?

“We continue to introduce new plants,” Bill answers. “And we’re constantly showing new looks to it, whether it’s ceramic pots or wicker or speed covers. We’ve got some new things coming out with John Henry. We’re constantly trying to keep it fresh and new.” **GT**