

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

6/1/2018

Inspiration from a Dandelion Cutting

Anne-Marie Hardie



From an extremely young age, Ed Hebbe could be found in his yard digging in the dirt. In fact, he doesn't remember a time where he wasn't gardening.

"I would even yank dandelions up for the sole purpose of transplanting them," he said.

When his family moved to Montana, Ed took his gardening up a notch and began experimenting with seeds.

"I had several vegetable gardens over the years. This evolved to flowers, and then eventually, adding plants throughout the yard," said Ed. "My father was always by my side, making sure that I had quality soil to start my own garden."

Young Ed's passion for gardening made an impression on his neighbor, who built him an 8 by 10-ft. greenhouse, which he gave with only one condition: that Ed would take care of his yard.

"During those foundational years, I learned about growing both from my personal experiences and what I read," said Ed.

The journey from hobbyist to entrepreneur began when Ed had a product surplus, so he loaded the excess plants onto his trucks and sold the flowers outside the local bank.



Pictured: Ed Hebbe, owner of Circle H Growers, said his love for growing started as a child when he would pick dandelions out of the ground and transplant them in containers. Circle H Growers in Deer Lodge, Montana, offers a wide selection of perennials, annuals, trees and shrubs.

"Growing my business took time," said Ed. "I made a lot of mistakes, but I just went back to the books, learned what I did wrong and how to fix it."

Eventually, he knew that it was time to expand his business from "back-of-the-truck" sales to a fixed location.

"One day, I thought, I'm going to leap in and do this," said Ed. "I placed a loan on my truck and used the money to purchase my first greenhouse to replace the aging one

from my childhood."

Located in Deer Lodge, Montana, Circle H Growers—originally named the Potting Bench—opened its doors in 1995. The company was rebranded to Circle H Growers to reflect both Ed's name and his love for the rodeo.

"A circle represents my love of Western rodeos, but it also signifies the circle of life, making Circle H Growers the ideal name for my business," said Ed.

The initial business model was structured around fulfilling and growing customers' spring orders, and in turn, selling any excess products to drop-in clients. The community demand quickly exceeded the space available in the small greenhouse and Ed knew it was time to expand. In 1997, he made the decision to purchase a 27 by 60-ft. Stuppy polyhouse to grow his business. Today, Circle H Growers offers a wide selection of perennials, annuals, trees and shrubs to the Deer Lodge community.

To stay on top of the several plant varieties he sources and grows, Ed created a detailed ordering and planting schedule. The schedule is updated each June, adding in the new discoveries/sales from the spring.

"I keep track of the areas that did well and where I should cut back on some products," says Ed. "The notes are used to help determine what I need (and don't need) for the following spring."

However, Ed admits that with so many new plants on the market, it can quickly become overwhelming. His approach to new items is extremely realistic, adding (and in turn evaluating) a few new products each year.

Most recently, he increased the diversity of succulents that he offers, adding the collectible Chick Charms, eliciting creativity from his landscaper clientele.

"You can use succulents for so many different things," he said. "One of our landscapers, Katherine, came in with eight large pedestals (40 by 18-in. deep), which she filled with hens and chicks, and other succulents and perennials to offer something that her client couldn't find off the shelf at a box store."

During the off-season, Ed works at the local grocery store, where he interacts with both current and potential clients on a different level. In fact, it's his involvement with the local community that has really helped to take Circle H Growers to the next level.

It was through these grocery store interactions that Ed discovered that one of his loyal landscaper clients was predicting a large demand for hanging baskets in the spring. A quick conversation resulted in Ed dedicating an entire greenhouse solely for this landscaper's hanging basket orders.

In addition to working at the grocery store, Circle H Grower provides donations to a variety of non-profit groups in the

community and is a sponsor of the local rodeos.

“When you invest in your community and get your name out there, it's amazing how many people show up on your doorstep,” said Ed.

Social media has also become an invaluable tool in Circle H Growers marketing strategy. With more than 1,500 followers on Facebook, Ed uses the platform for advertising, events and sharing company news, like his introduction of Chick Charms and Night Sky Pink Petunia this year. Over the years, he has shared his success with his community contacts hoping to persuade them to also get online.

“The rodeo, for example, has a Facebook page, but they are not promoting their events one month in advance, so I spent some time explaining the benefits of it to them,” said Ed. “Do some targeting marketing; it really works.”

One event where Ed saw this success firsthand was for their local summer garden tour where Ed volunteered his location as the final stop of the tour. With some targeted marketing, Circle H Growers was able to help the event planners increase the attendance from seven to 50, becoming an even bigger event than they had anticipated.

When asked about the future for Circle H Growers, Ed is extremely optimistic. For the first time in years, Ed noticed that his customers appeared confident about the economy, purchasing products with minimal attention to the price.

“This year, I'm anticipating that the positive momentum will continue,” said Ed. “I've even gone out on a limb and added hard goods to my product lineup.”

Last year, Ed added glazed pottery to his inventory, which sold quite well, so this year, he's adding more styles to his product line, including rustic style pots and galvanized cans.

With the economy appearing to be on an upswing, it can be extremely appealing for new growers to take the leap. Ed advises that these growers start small, take it slow and avoid accruing too much debt.

“Make the business pay for itself; borrow from your savings account at the beginning of the season, but make sure it's reimbursed by the end,” said Ed. “And don't forget to build connections both with your local community and a network of growers.” **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.