

THREE TOADS FARM

SPECIALTY FLOWER GROWERS



FLOWER POWER

Three Toads Farm flourishes
as region's premier lily producer



By Beverly Fortune / Photos by Boo Hardy

On Saturday mornings Charlie Hendricks is up well before dawn to load his trailer with hundreds of oriental lilies, drive to Lexington from Winchester, and set up the Three Toads Farm flower stand at the Lexington Farmers Market by 6 a.m.

He arranges rows of tall buckets crowded with the beautiful lilies, then props up a large sign painted with the farm's logo showing three playful toads waving lilies. Soon the flowers' intense spicy fragrance is wafting through the downtown market.

With Three Toads' loyal following, the lilies usually sell out by noon.

Fred Lawson shows up most weeks to buy a bouquet for his wife, his office, or for a church friend who might be sick. "I grew up on a farm, and I've always had a soft spot in my heart for flow-

Elizabeth Montgomery and her father, Charlie Hendricks, are prepared for their many loyal customers on a Saturday morning at Farmers Market.

ers," said Lawson, president of Contract Machining & Manufacturing Co., in Nicholasville. "It's been great to see their business grow over the years because the flowers are beautiful and they are such nice people."

When garden designer Jon Carloftis and his partner Dale Fischer are having a party, they buy not two or three lilies, but an armload. "When you have lilies in the house and you have people over, the lilies become the topic of conversation because they are so fantastic," Carloftis said.

Jeff Dabbolt, manager of Farmers Market, calls Three Toads Farm "our premier flower vendor over the years. They're a market mainstay in terms of attendance and quality."

flower power

Dream takes root

Three Toads Farm specialty cut-flower business was started in the late 1990s by three Clark County friends: Hendricks, Val Schirmer, and Bob Early.

The idea for growing cut flowers took root with Schirmer, who grew up in Colorado and was influenced by her grandmother's sprawling flower gardens in Denver. "I idolized my grandmother. I wanted masses of flowers just like she had," she said.

Schirmer moved to Kentucky in 1975 with her boyfriend after she graduated from Colorado State University. For several years she test-grew flowers for White Flower Farm, a mail-order nursery in Litchfield, Conn.

But growing satisfied only part of her urge to be involved with flowers. "I wanted to sell them," Schirmer said. But she didn't want to quit her job as marketing director for Valvoline Instant Oil Change to take on flower production full time.

On summer evenings when she and her husband, Darrell, would sit on their front porch with Hendricks and his wife, Cheryl, sipping bourbon and listening to the crickets chirp, Schirmer talked about her dream of having a business selling flowers.

Hendricks, who retired in 2000 from the Lexington Fire Department, fi-



Growing lilies and other flowers is a labor-intensive and year-round endeavor.



Val Schirmer, left, and Hendricks eventually hope to turn the business over to Montgomery.

nally told Schirmer he would raise the flowers if she would sell them.

Early, who owns the farm where the lilies are raised, was brought into the fold because he and Hendricks were childhood friends and had a large garden together every summer. Early taught automotive mechanics at Clark County Vocational and Technical School. The lilies are raised on Early's farm on the outskirts of Winchester.

"From the start, we all shared the same idea. We wanted to grow something very special and only the best quality," Schirmer said.

Summer flowers such as zinnias and marigolds are abundant at Farmers Market, but nobody was selling oriental lilies. The partners saw the opportunity to capitalize on making these elegant, richly perfumed flowers their specialty.

"We wanted to grow something other people couldn't grow, wouldn't grow, or didn't know how," Schirmer said.

With little farming experience the fledgling growers made their share of mistakes learning the ins and outs of how to grow and market flowers.

Not to be confused with day lilies, oriental lilies are true lilies from the *Lilium* family. They grow from soft, fleshy bulbs made up of overlapping scales, not solid bulbs like tulip and daffodil bulbs. These produce large exotic-looking flowers, with strong stems and a strong fragrance.

Learning curve

The first three years the lilies were field grown.

"There were so many problems when you grow that way — insects, soil-borne diseases, weather. Just one thing after another," Hendricks said. "That's not how you get perfect lilies."

Perfection was their goal.

By the fourth growing season Hendricks and Early had built the first of two greenhouses and planted the lilies in pots set on long tables. A greenhouse protects the fragile petals, cuts down on insect and disease problems, and allows Hendricks to regulate their bloom cycle better by controlling temperature and hours of daylight provided by natural light and growlights. During the long, cold days of December and January, Hendricks supplements with up to

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three hours of artificial light.

"They grow flawless in the greenhouse," Schirmer said. "That's what people pay for."

Thanks to the greenhouses, Three Toads does not have an



The partners initially sold their lilies in Ale-8-One bottles.

off-season. "That is the point of the greenhouses, so we can offer lilies year-round," Hendricks said. In the winter they sell mainly to restaurants and art galleries and deliver flowers to a small number of customers.

The partners also have learned to market their flowers. The first year, stems were cut short, stuck in Ale-8-One bottles, and sold for \$1 each.

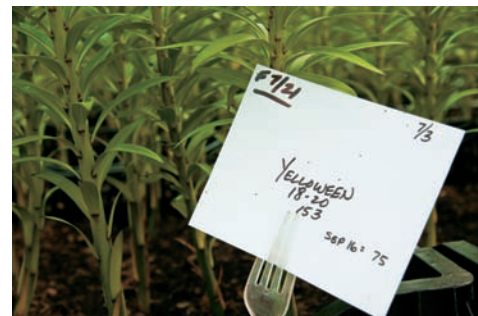
"Right away a customer came up and said, 'Honey, you need to cut longer stems and sell them for more than a dollar,'" Schirmer said. Today, stems are at least 24 inches.

Lilies this season sell for \$9 a stem

or three for \$25.

Before the economy took a nose-dive in 2008, Three Toads grew close to 12,000 lilies. When the recession hit, the partners worried for a while if their business would survive. "Flowers are a discretionary item. People can't eat them. You buy them with the extra money you have, and our sales plummeted," Hendricks said.

Cutting back production and careful management of money steered Three Toads through that rough patch. Today the farm grows about 7,000 pots of oriental lilies annually.



Meticulous record-keeping is a key to success for Three Toads.

Beyond lilies

Three Toads makes producing beautiful flowers look simple, but a large part of its success is attention to detail. Hendricks keeps meticulous records on each variety of lily grown — the dates bulbs are planted and fertilized, daily greenhouse temperatures, minutes of daylight, and bloom date.

"Rule of thumb — it takes 95 to 100 days from the time bulbs are planted till they bloom," Hendricks said. "When you're growing to sell and you need several hundred stems on the Saturday



Montgomery, Hendricks, and Schirmer pause to smell the lilies.

before Mother's Day, timing is everything."

Oriental lilies remain Three Toads' signature flower, but the farm has expanded into other specialty flower crops. It sells 2,000 pots of tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths at the Blue Grass Trust Antiques & Garden Show each March. Two seasons ago Three Toads began growing sweet peas, a delicately fragrant early spring flower. Sweet peas are another Three Toads' exclusive at the market.

Three Toads also digs up its bulbs and sells them at the Farmers Market in the fall, and customers rush for the chance to buy these tried-and-true producers. Three Toads then buys batches of new bulbs that will produce the biggest blooms for its cut flower business.

In summer flower lovers buy bouquets of lisianthus, an excellent cut flower, and pollen-free sunflowers (that don't drop messy pollen on table tops) created by Schirmer and Hendricks' daughter, Elizabeth Montgomery.

Two years ago Montgomery began custom-growing flowers for weddings, a business she calls Weddings by Three Toads Farm.

Alix Davidson Keller is one of Three Toads' satisfied brides. "The flowers were just the colors I wanted, and they were wonderfully fresh, not shipped thousands of miles," she said. And Keller knew because the flowers were grown in Winchester. "We helped support the local farm economy, which was important to me."

Today Hendricks hires local farmers to plow, till, and lay black plastic in the field where the summer annuals grow, but other than that, he and Schirmer do most of the hands-on work of running Three Toads. Early is now mostly a silent partner. Montgomery is being groomed eventually to take over Three Toads.

Until then, Hendricks will still be getting up hours before daylight to load his truck and head to market on Saturday mornings in Lexington. **KM**

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