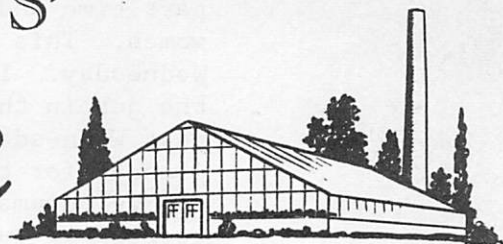




MINNESOTA STATE FLORISTS' *Bulletin*



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GERANIUMS AS THEY FIT INTO OUR PROGRAM¹

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First, I intend to give a step-by-step description of the handling of one group of unrooted cuttings received by us. Then I will talk about other aspects of the crop.

1. We do not grow stock plants. All of our cuttings are grown in California and shipped to us. I have memories of 25 years ago when we grew our own stock in the old way. In recent years, I have done a lot of thinking about returning to growing stock by one of the many new methods now available. The big problem is, what would we chop out of the rotation to make room for the stock plants? There is just no room! Actually, the people in California are doing a better job from a disease standpoint and we have very little trouble.
2. We are fortunate in having nearly direct air freight service from California at a cost of only 7/10 of a cent per cutting. Cuttings are shipped to us at noon one day and we have them potted and on the bench by 5 p.m. the next day.
3. We receive geraniums on Wednesdays during the season, which lasts from early September to December 15th or so. Some weeks, we get them for both Wednesday and Thursday. Each group of 8,000 cuttings comprises 1 day's work. The cuttings arrive on Tuesday evening about 8 p.m., so we can start on them the first thing in the morning. We have five neighborhood ladies cut and trim the cuttings. This process takes about 7 hours. At the same time, the men get ready and start potting. This part of the process uses three and one-half men plus one and one-half

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carryout men -- the one-half man is, of course, one man who pots part time and carries out part time. Potters, at times, are women. This operation starts and finishes on that one day -- Wednesday. It is a good thing for us to organize and schedule the job in this manner for two reasons. First -- everyone knows that Wednesday will be devoted to this job so no other work is planned for that day, if possible. Second -- speed in getting the geraniums out of the boxes and on the benches is one of the secrets of success with California stock. Every hour the cuttings remain in the box decreases your rooting percentage. Very little damage occurs the first day, but when cuttings are left over for the second day it is really bad news.

We put all cuttings directly into 2 1/4-inch square peat pots in a soil mix of four soil, one sand, one peat. By doing a bit of time and motion study, the people doing the work become very efficient and can really put out a lot of work in a short time. Believe it or not, most of the time-saving steps used were worked out by the people involved and much credit is due them for this. Direct potting also tends to keep the occasional bad cutting isolated in the pot it was supposed to root in. Troubles don't spread as they would in a sand bench.

4. Once the cuttings are potted and placed on the bench, they are watered in and handled as you would any geranium cutting. The usual 10 days or so serve to see them rooted. We normally get 90 to 95 percent rooting.
5. At the end of the 10-day rooting period, the plants are spaced and graded out for quality. This one process probably does more to keep our quality image than any other thing we do. We grade in three categories, No. 1, No. 2, and discards. The No. 1's are spaced in one area and the No. 2's are concentrated on another bench by themselves. We do not run a real big percentage of No. 2's, but we have enough so that separating them results in enough saved plants to nearly pay for the grading. If these smaller plants were left among the larger plants, they would of course be smothered and lost. It takes a week or so longer for the No. 2's to reach salable size, but they come through to be real fine plants. Usually they are merely smaller branches found on the larger cuttings or larger cuttings that just rooted more slowly than normal for some reason or other. By this process, we come up with bushy, short, heavy plants that are a far cry from the usual run of 2 1/4-inch plants you see on the market. Some growers will say that spacing and sorting is too expensive laborwise to be practical, but I feel that I cannot afford not to do it. We get good prices for our annual production of 140,000 2 1/4-inch plants and feel that we owe our customers a uniformly high quality product for the price. The grading process usually takes 3 "man days" per 8,000 cuttings. We have a clever little pronged board device that is used to handle 15 or so plants in one scoop. One of our men invented the device and it saves lots of time and backaches.

6. It takes approximately 2 weeks from grading time before plants are ready to be shipped.
7. We use approximately 25,000 of these 2 1/4-inch plants ourselves for 4-inch pots. Five thousand of the smallest grade at the end of the shipping season are put in 3-inch pots. We use the full size 4-inch pot, as our market calls for a quality geranium. We have, for a number of years, sold 4-inch pots at 79 cents each retail and 3-inch pots at 49 cents. This coming spring, we expect to go up in price on these items.
8. Once you have the crop ready for sale, you must sell it. We accomplish this via ads in trade journals, some direct mail, and by personal contact. I would say that most of our crop goes to customers of previous seasons. Some buy on standing orders from year to year, some to augment limited production of their own, and some of course respond to the ads for the first time. It is a real gratifying thing to us that we have so much repeat business. It serves to let us know that we have pleased our customer and this is important. Perhaps I could next describe this crop's place in our rotation. Our geranium production is a catch crop, as we handle it. We all realize that to grow any small margin crop such as this, we must grow in large volume to have it pay at all. This is a philosophy that is very open to argument and I know it. One could say that if it does not pay well on a per unit basis, why grow a lot of it when higher margin crops are available? I can only reply that I need a bridge right at this time of year that will carry us through a period when we have an insufficient market to expand other more profitable production. We must keep our trained people employed the year around. Since we are a retail grower establishment and concentrate heavily on spring production, it means that we must plan to use our space as well as possible for the balance of the year. Poinsettia production fills our benches from spring up to the geranium crop, and geraniums until spring production. I do not mean to say that poinsettias and geraniums are all we have during this time, but they are the crops that fill up the benches which would not be occupied otherwise.
9. We feel we can clear out with a modest profit on 2 1/4-inch geraniums -- perhaps 15 percent if all goes well. I can handle simple arithmetic as well as the next fellow, but I really have no intention of standing up here and defending the intangible factors used to come up with that 15 percent figure. I doubt whether this crop could show a profit if we did not have a small fortune in laborsaving devices. Yet, these devices must be spread over our entire operation, costwise. I get bored listening to other people talk costs, so I will not bore you. I wonder how many people in the audience today have had the same experience as myself. I go to a lot of these meetings and get good ideas. Everytime I go home with one of these sets of cost figures some fellow presents, I find myself real hard at work trying to use them sensibly in comparing with mine. It becomes obvious that the fellow who wrote them has a different

operation than I. Therefore no real comparison is possible.² There is only one point I would like to make on costs. They are up for all of us! This trend will continue. We who have survived have done so by becoming more efficient. More can and will be done to improve efficiency. The gap is still narrowing. Some day, I hope, our industry will grow up and realize that we cannot go on thinking that competition is best met by low prices. We must learn that we can get more for our product from the public if we just have the courage to ask more. It sometimes seems that florists must have the largest inferiority complexes in the world! We have the most attractive, the most beautiful product in the world and we price it as though we were ashamed of it!