

Our Raving Reporter

By Denise Smith, Garden Smith Greenhouses

I have come to a conclusion. There are no awards given, nor prizes earned, for working the most hours in a day, days in a row, or years with no time off. There's a time for that in a small business, but eventually, the business must begin to stand on its own, and start to give the owner's life back. If it doesn't, both the business and the owner suffer. Too many of us wear "near-exhaustion" as a badge of honor. Bigger is not always better. The race may go to the swift, but the battle goes to whoever is left standing, and life goes to whoever enjoyed it and made a positive difference.

I've been trying to surround myself with positive people lately. Archie and Lena McAfee, of A & L Greenhouses near Dublin fit that bill pretty well. They were both teachers, and Archie had a little lean-to greenhouse behind their house that he kept as a hobby. When they retired, they decided to make growing their second career. Starting in 1992, they put up an Atlas quonset, and have added at least one house a year ever since. Now they have three quonsets, one gutter-connect, and a shade house. Their children helped build the first couple of houses, but they had the construction crews from Atlas come put up the gutter-connect.

It's not big operation, nor is it a fancy one, but it is neat and clean as a pin, and organized well enough that just the two of them can do the work and have time for their four children, eight grandchildren, and three GREAT grandchildren. All the hanging baskets and the potted crops are on drip tubes, so they can water everything in about 1 1/2 hours. Archie's sister comes over to help out when they need her. A & L is about 80% wholesale. Lena runs a truck route one day a week to call on florists, garden centers and other customers. They are open for retail from Wednesday through Saturday. This year, they have about 3,500 fern baskets. They pot the liners into a 5" pot to get established, then pot them into the 10" baskets to finish. Though they have tried other varieties, this year they are doing mostly Boston Masai and Compacta, with a few Curly Welch Ferns, which they say won't shed. They tried a variety called Euro, which produced 4' fronds, but it never really made the nice full head their customers liked, and the shear size was difficult for them to handle.

They have a few of the old-fashioned Petticoat ferns that they propagate themselves. They were driving along a country road, and saw a Confederate Rose (*Hibiscus mutabilis*) blooming in a lady's garden. Lena wanted one for her garden, so they stopped to ask the lady if they could have a start. While chatting with the lady, Archie spotted some Petticoat ferns hanging on the porch. They left with a piece of the hibiscus and a basket of ferns.

They do some bedding plants, and quite a few different types of potted plants. Lena's favorite bedding plant is the vinca. They do well for her customers and in her garden. Archie doesn't have a favorite plant. He enjoys watching them grow, and learning about the plants and what makes them happy. He is glad for the opportunity to do something which he and Lena both enjoy, and that gives them a sense of adventure. They drive to Apopka to pick up their liners, so they can be sure of their quality. Archie likes to be able to ask questions, and to see first-hand how things work. They try new plants frequently, determining what works best for them and for their customers. They even try old plants, just to have fun. Lena has a big Rick-rack plant hanging near her kitchen that they got from someone else. And who'd'a think you'd ever see a pineapple growing in Dublin, Georgia?? If I'd been two weeks later I probably could have sweet-talked them into harvesting it and sharing. (Well, probably not, but I would have tried.) They propagate the pups that form at the base. That gives them new plants to sell and enough to keep as stock (and to eat!)

Archie is originally from Dublin. In fact, he was born in the old farm house that is still on the property. Lena is from Texas. She was on her way back home to Texas after visiting Mardi Gras, and had to change buses in Shreveport.

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Archie was in the Air Force, and on his way from Lackland to Cheyenne, and his bus had a layover. As Archie tells it, he stayed on the bus during the layover, and was sitting behind the driver. There was one other passenger sitting towards the back of the bus. Lena got on and looked around, then smiled at Archie and asked "Is this seat taken?" (Lena says the bus was full—nobody else wanted to sit with Archie!) They struck up a pleasant conversation, and exchanged addresses. They kept up correspondence while Archie was overseas. After he returned, the friendship developed into a romance, and they married in 1959.

Lena was a business teacher, and has kept up with all the changes in technology, including computers. Today, she uses that experience in keeping the company's books. She also enjoys needlework when she can find the time. Archie was a children's music teacher, and stays active in the community. He has tied his keyboards into his computer to work on composing, and re-scoring some songs. A true Scotsman, he plays the bagpipes. If he can get them fixed in time, we just about have him talked in to playing a little bit at the Christmas party. Call him and give him some encouragement!

Oh, yeah, P.T.?? Just remember...the owls are not what they seem. And the Christmas party is coming up. No telling what will find its way into Santa's bag. SOME of us don't have to be politically correct!!! (.....sighhhhh.....)



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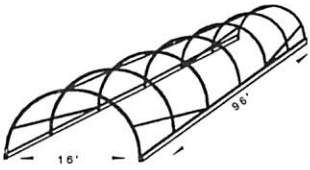
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