

Home/Garden

Seeds grow into family business

My husband and I were sailing along Route 22A through Fair Haven, returning home after the great Vermont family reunion when our attention was caught by a group of people working in a beautiful new garden by the side of the road. We were so taken by the artistically arranged rows and trellises festooned with brilliant scarlet runner bean flowers that we barely noticed the sign — The Vermont Bean Seed Company. I've bought seed from the Vermont Bean Seed Company for several years so I couldn't resist the opportunity to visit their garden.

We drove down the driveway and up to the big red barn that houses the operation and met Jack Burke, the brand new owner, in his Bean Seed T-shirt on his way out to join other staff members for a little gardening.

It was soon obvious that selling seeds is not just a business to Jack and his wife, Mary Sautter, or to their employees. They are all enthusiastic gardeners who bring affection and joy as well as knowledge and energy to their work. Jack and Mary just bought the company from its founder, Guy Thomas. Although they are finding that the soil in the new garden is something less than fertile, their new enterprise is showing signs of vigorous growth.

When the Vermont Bean Seed Company was founded in 1972, the mainstay of its mail order business was beans. Over the years the selection of seed varieties has grown and now Jack and Mary are overseeing the company's entry into the retail market. Their seeds and products can now be bought in selected retail

Pat
Leuchtman



Between
The Rows

stores in Los Angeles and Chicago as well as Burlington, Vermont and my own neighborhood Bread and Circus in Hadley. And this is just one of the changes that is beginning for the Vermont Bean Seed Company.

Another is the display and trial garden, a project initiated by the employees. Jack said he welcomes this kind of contribution, and counts on it for good ideas. The new garden is a way they can all share their love for gardening in a much more direct way while they learn about more of the seeds they sell.

Visitors are welcome Monday through Saturday right now, and soon there will be a little visitor's center so that even when staff isn't on duty, visitors can pick up a map and information about the garden and give themselves a self-guided tour. Clearly Jack and Mary feel that providing the kind of information that helps gardeners be successful is an important part of their business.

Recently, they initiated a regional gardeners' network that has 120 members across the country. Their plan is to come up with regional seed guides, that will list the best varieties for each region — those that are best suited to the different climates, soils and growing conditions.

They are also fortunate to have

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David Cunningham, a graduate of the University of Vermont. He is the staff horticulturist and the person who is summoned when the phone rings and someone asks, "Is this the company that answers questions?" They are. The phone number is 802-265-4212.

David gave us our tour of the garden which was put in just this spring. The soil is a sandy loam that hasn't been worked with since the property was a working farm in the '30s. David said because the soil needs a lot of building up with organic matter they're digging in lake weed from Lake Champlain and using it to mulch the paths. So far they've gotten about 14 loads of lake weed, and there is general cheering when a load comes in with lots of dead minnows and fish because it means that much more fertilizer.

David showed us the beans that were the original mainstay of the company and the oriental greens that David says have just taken off since they added them — along with herbs

This garden has also been chosen by the All America Selections committee to display their winners like Sweet Mama and Table King Bush Acorn Squash.

"Heirloom seeds are a small part of our garden, but they are very important to us," David said. "Recently, a gardener who was about 80 years old felt he couldn't keep up his garden any longer and he sent us a complete set of all his heirloom vegetables to grow so they wouldn't be lost. They come with stories about how they were grown in Latvia or other places and then carried to this country. We even have a wine red bean, a kind of fava, that was sent by a Native American."

Only a year ago Jack and Mary were living in New Hampshire where they had a little hobby farm with an organic, self-sufficient garden, "our getaway from the corporate life." When they abandoned Mary's landscape design business and Jack's position at Wang, they didn't dream that they would own a seed business.

Then Mary was hired as executive vice president at VBS Co. last fall after their move to Whiting and they soon realized that they would be able to take their interest in gardening and the country out of the hobby category and make it central to their life and business.

Visit the new garden by the side of the road in Fair Haven or write for their catalog, Garden Lane, Fair Haven, Vt. 05743. This year their first Christmas catalog, A Circle of Seasons, will be available at the end of October.



Garden calendar

On the House