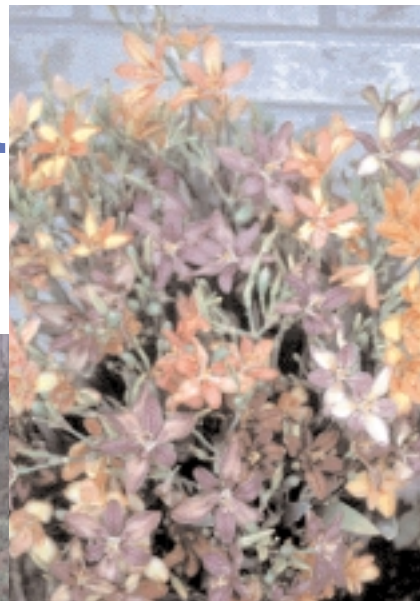
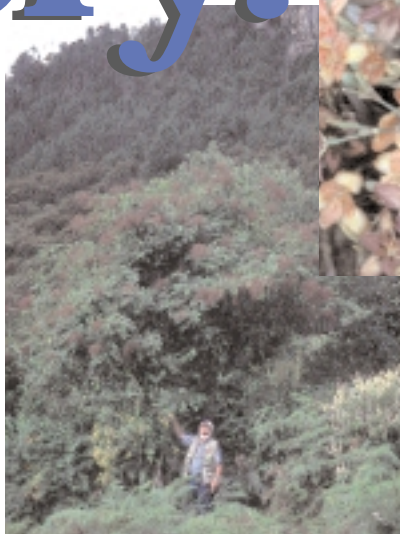


Bluebird Nursery:

Going the Distance for Good Plants



Left: Harlan Hamernik on a plant-finding trip last year in China. Above: One of the plants gathered on an earlier trip. Pardancanda has become a big seller for Bluebird. (Photos this page courtesy of Bluebird Nursery.)

Inner Mongolia is a long way from rural Nebraska, and not just in terms of miles. However, some of the plants normally found perched on high Tibetan mountains or growing wild on the branches of Chinese trees have found a home with a family in Nebraska.

When Shirley and Harlan Hamernik opened their greenhouse in Clarkson, Neb., they had no idea it would eventually lead them to such places as Siberia, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, not to mention the travel within the United States. They just wanted to move back home to start their family.

In fact, other than coming from "gardening" families, neither Harlan nor Shirley had any experience with horticulture or operating a greenhouse. But what started in 1958 as a "husband and wife" hobby has evolved into a major wholesale/retail horticultural operation with over 90 employees, customers throughout the United States and Canada, and over ten million plants shipped wholesale last year.

A LOVE OF PLANTS

According to Tom Hamernik, Shirley and Harlan's oldest son and Bluebird's operations manager, the driving force behind Bluebird Nursery is Harlan's love of plants.

"Harlan always felt there were lots of great plants that were limited in the market because they weren't easy to produce in large numbers, which means you couldn't make a good profit with them," adds Shirley. "That disturbed him.

Harlan wanted to see things in the market even if they weren't all that profitable. He wanted to see some interesting plants like the kinds he has been bringing forward being sold just because they're great plants."

The prospect of "discovering" new and interesting plants led Harlan to formalize a partnership between the University of Nebraska and the Chinese Forestry Division. The exchange helped China develop plants, particularly nuts, that they could grow for export. In return, a group representing the University of Nebraska, including Harlan Hamernik, has been allowed entry into several Asian countries to collect plants and seeds. So far, Harlan has made three trips to Asia and collected enough seeds to keep him busy for a long time.

Bluebird Nursery devotes approximately 3,000 sq. ft. of production space to plants gathered on Harlan's plant finding trips and estimates the plants add approximately \$300,000 to the business the first year they are introduced, and more if the plants become very popular. Though it takes many years to ready the plants for wholesale production, Bluebird has added a surprising



Top left: Harvesting seeds becomes a full-time job several days every season. Top right: Tom Hamernik pictured with *Persicaria* 'Red Dragon.' Bottom: One of the four large greenhouses at Bluebird Nursery.

number of plants to its catalog each of the past three years: 132 new listings in 1999, 107 in 2000 and 200 in 2001.

Among these new introductions are *Dracocephalum grandiflorum*, a gentian blue herbaceous *Labiatae*, *D. austriacum*, *D. nutans*, *D. ruyschiana* ('Nordic Dragonhead') and *D. tanguticum*, all from Tibet. This year, Bluebird will also introduce *Oenothera macrocarpa* 'Comanche Campfire' on behalf of the Great Plants for the Great Plains group — a group of growers who, like Harlan, value native plants and harvesting plants native to the great plains states.

Another addition that took Bluebird by surprise is a potted species lily. "We never expected to be offering small pots of species lilies," recalls Harlan, "until *L. martag* from Northern Asia and Siberia was such a hit. For '01, we're offering *L. tenuifolium* from Inner Mongolia and *L. formosana varpricei* from the mountains of Taiwan. We will probably add more varieties in the years ahead."

LEARNING TO FLY

Starting a greenhouse operation with no prior experience is a pretty big challenge, but having no preconceived ideas about how it should

be done, Shirley and Harlan read every pertinent publication they could get their hands on, traveled to nurseries and asked questions of university and extension personnel and respected plantmen. Harlan became active in the International Plant Propagators' Society, as well as other trade associations. Both participated in educational conferences, spent long hours at trial gardens taking notes and then hit the books when they got home to research any questions they had.

Bluebird's original operation was exclusively bedding plants. The emphasis in production has shifted through the years in response to trends in gardening. In the late 1950s, as the self-service garden center market was developing, Bluebird was a leader in the production of flowering annuals and vegetables in individual market packs with color picture labels. When the house plant craze of the 70s hit, growth moved into that area. Within the past 15 years, Bluebird has moved emphasis to perennials, ornamentals, and native grasses, vines, wildflowers and herbs.

With the switch to perennials, ornamentals and natives, Bluebird seems to have taken off. The nursery now operates approximately 10 acres of production space at three locations in Clarkson, much of it under structures with underground heating, rolling benches, fog systems, lighting, shade/energy curtains, etc. In addition, a separate retail division, Gardenland, operates a garden center and re-wholesaling operation.

The latest addition to the Bluebird complex, completed last year, is a custom-built Nexus cutting propagation house. The 32,000 sq. ft. house, equipped with Argus controls, Cherry Creek tower booms, Howe benching and BioTherm heating, is prepped for an additional 55,000 sq. ft. expansion.

Bluebird's production spaces are not all this sophisticated, though. With 8.5 acres of greenhouse space, some of it dating back to the 70s, they have a range of structures matching the range of plants they produce.

"It's good to have a variety of structures," explains Tom, "because different structures work better for different plants."

GETTING THE WORD OUT

As many of their competitors have, Bluebird Nursery has not taken an aggressive approach to marketing. Their marketing push is primarily via two avenues: a yearly catalog and continuous industry involvement.

Every year since 1978, Bluebird has published a wholesale catalog. The 2000 catalog, of which 13,000 were published, is 174 pages long, with 28 pages in color. The 2001 version is expected to be slightly larger.

Interest for Bluebird's new varieties is, however, mostly spread by word of mouth. Tom and Harlan are active in numerous industry associations and trade groups, where Harlan often gives lectures detailing his travels abroad and the fruits of those trips.

This might seem like Bluebird is leaving too much to chance in today's marketing-driven industry, but the strategy has worked well for them. Several major seed companies have even asked Bluebird to supply them with seeds from some of Harlan's unusual plants.

That's not bad for two people who just wanted to move their family back home.

Bridget White is an associate editor for GPN.