

Editorials • Columns • Features • Classified ads



The whole house

This is the length of one of the Plantry's greenhouses. Most of the poinsettias are the red topped variety, but some are white at the top. At the rear of the house, there is a large fan, which will pull air through a wet cardboard mesh and keep the young poinsettias cool in the hot summer months. The plastic duct near the ceiling is part of the greenhouse heating system.

Poinsettia business blooming in Hoke County

By Ed Miller

Step into the door of the greenhouse and find a sea of bright red as far as the house stretches.

Ned Webb and his partner Patty Falgiano are in the poinsettia business, and this time of year is their big season.

Although there are many different varieties of poinsettias in different colors and promoters of the plant have been trying for years to make them year round attractions, the plants still sell best around Christmas, Webb said.

Falgiano and Webb have poinsettias. They have 5,000 of them in the three greenhouses of their Arabia area business, The Plantry.

The Plantry will sell poinsettias to businesses in Laurinburg, Aberdeen, Fayetteville and all the florists in Raeford.

Although few of these places buy exclusively from The Plantry, it is possible that the best poinsettias found in this area will be those grown by Webb and Falgiano.

"Quality is super important," said Webb.

With a smaller operation, and the special care the two people put into their plants, The Plantry

can grow better quality flowers than "plant factories," said Webb.

There is greater control over greenhouse conditions in smaller operations, he said.

The quality and care show in his plants.

Thanks to a plastic duct system that is like a long plastic bag with holes in it, and heaters and a fan, temperature can be controlled in each of the three greenhouses to within 3° throughout the house.

The greenhouses, built by Webb, can also be cooled by a system in which water trickles across a cardboard mesh. Air is pulled through the wet mesh by fans at the opposite end of the house and, even in the summer, the temperature can be kept at about 65°.

Watering 5,000 plants could prove to be somewhat of a chore; however, with the watering system installed by Webb, the turning of a few knobs can water all three greenhouses.

Just behind one of the houses, water pipes stick up out of the ground. Between these pipes, a fertilizer canister can be installed.

Plants can then be watered and fertilized at the same time.

The life of a poinsettia starts in August at the Plantry.

Seeds are not used. Cuttings are put in four or six and one half inch pots and rooted, said Falgiano.

When the cuttings are placed in the pot, they must be "pinched."

Everywhere there is a leaf on the very young plant, a "bract" will grow.

The bract is the portion on the top of the stem that turns red.

The bract is not the flower of the plant contrary to popular rumor. The actual flower is very small and is situated in the middle of the bract.

And, while rumors are being dispelled, it should be noted that poinsettias are not poisonous.

In fact, when the plants reach adulthood, small drops of a clear fluid may sometimes be seen oozing from the flowers.

This fluid is very sweet to the taste, much like the juice of a honeysuckle, and is not harmful.

Potting the small plants, native to northern Mexico, is crucial to the later life of the plant.

According to Webb, the larger the pot, the larger the plant will grow.

At some point during the growing cycle, a growth retardant is sprayed on the plants.

The retardant will not stop the growth of the bracts, but it will slow height growth, said Webb.

Special care must be taken at the beginning of the growth cycle not to allow disease to gain a foothold in the crop.

Webb spoke of a virus called Botrytis that is very harmful.

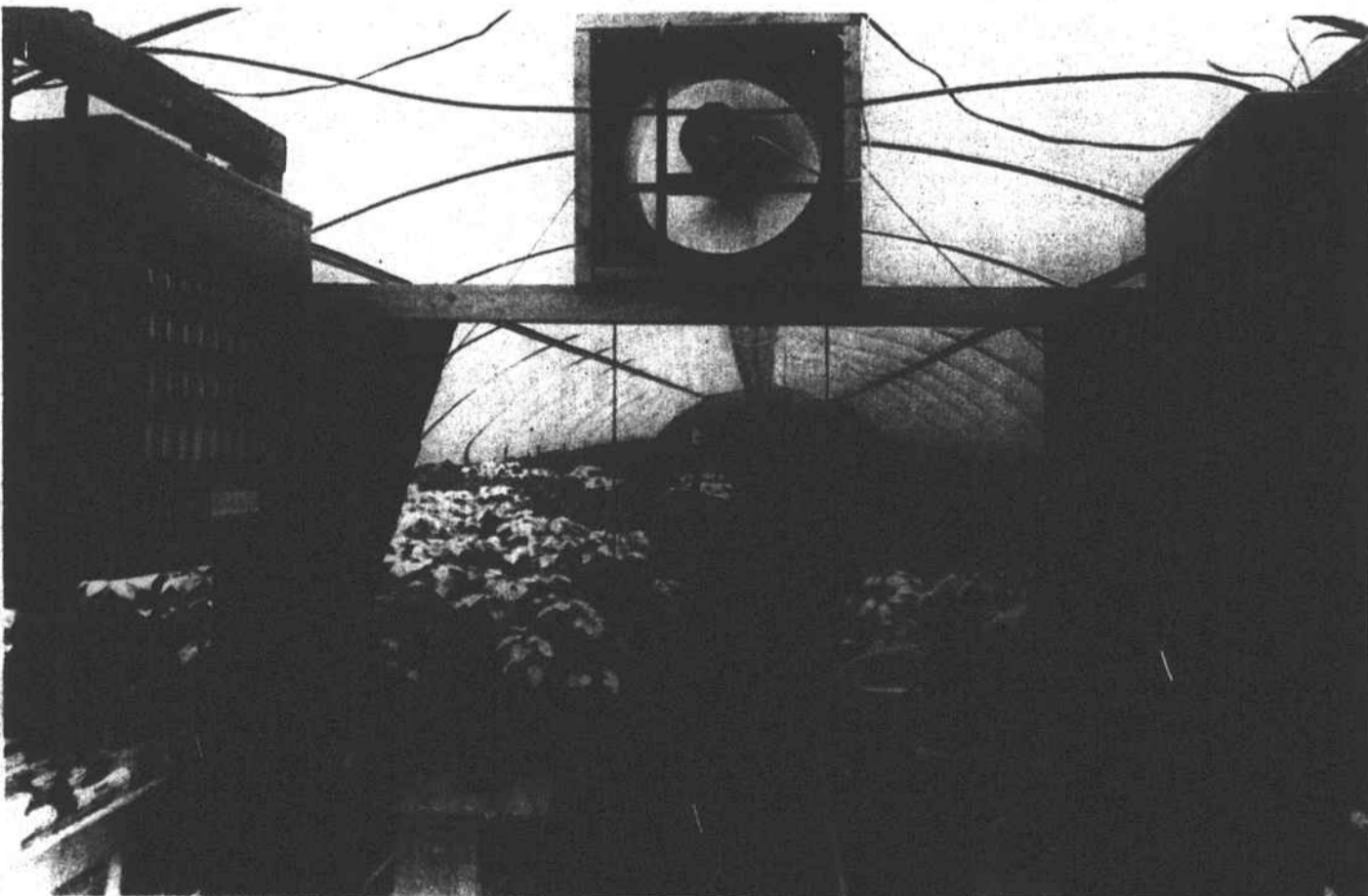
"By the time you know you have Botrytis, it is too late. The crop will be wiped out," said Webb.

This year at the Plantry, no such infestations have affected the crop.

Falgiano and Webb are busily moving and sorting very good plants from good ones and shipping each to vendors.

The four stages of the plant's growing cycle are over.

By the time Christmas arrives, there will be few if any poinsettias left in the greenhouses.



The system

This heating system is used to warm one of the smaller green houses. Designed and built by Webb, the two heaters on the side put out warm air which is pulled up into the fan and forced down the plastic duct. There are small holes all in the duct, and the air is pushed out of each one at about the same pressure throughout the length of the house.



The plants

In the middle of these plants, there are small nodes surrounded by red leaves. These are actually the flowers of the plant. When the plants are fully mature, there may be an occasional drop of a clear fluid found on the flowers. The fluid is very sweet and, like the rest of the poinsettia, is not poisonous. Many assume that poinsettias are native to the United States. They are not. They were brought from northern Mexico into this country in about 1825. They have only been commercial crops for about 100 years.