

Marketing



BLAZE OF COLOR: Raeann Huffman, Mariah Dale Anderson and Greg Anderson will grow 3,500 mums this year, in 30 colors.

Mum business blooms quickly

By HOLLY SPANGLER

SOMETIMES a new business venture happens due to intense planning and foresight. And sometimes it happens because the right person is in the right place at the right time with the right amount of gumption.

So it was for Mariah Dale Anderson, of Mariah's Mums in Clinton, Ill.

"We live across from a pumpkin farm, and they were looking for someone to grow mums," she recalls. "We had 5 acres so I said, 'We'll grow them!' My husband looked at me and said, 'You don't know how to grow mums!'"

Sure enough. The couple laughs about it now, but they went home that day and did some research. Greg Anderson told his wife there were two hurdles: First, he didn't want to water their stock by hand, and second, he didn't want to pinch back every mum. "I said, 'We'll do it if we can overcome those two hurdles.'"

So, they secured irrigators. Check. Then they researched first-generation, non-pinch mums, a relatively new entry to the market at the time. Check.

And in 2009, they grew their first crop of 300 mums. Unlike most other small growers who dipped a toe in the non-pinch waters, the Andersons planted 100% non-pinch mums the first year. They worked beautifully. In 2013, they'll harvest and sell 3,500 mums.

Growing season

Greg and Mariah begin the growing season in June. They order their mums as rooted cuttings, with 2 inches of plant and 2 inches of roots. The mums are placed on 70-by-150-foot mats, on 2-foot centers. Greg sets up a balanced water-soluble fertilizer that's delivered through the irrigation

Key Points

- Mariah and Greg Anderson started with 300 mums, expanded to 3,500 this year.
- Mariah's Mums sells 60% wholesale, 20% retail off-site, 20% retail from the farm.
- Expansion plans include bedding plants, produce and CSAs.

system, and they use a time-released fertilizer to provide continuous nutrition to the plant. Plants are watered three times a day for a set number of minutes. "It takes more water as the plants grow," he adds.

And while mums are naturally pest-resistant, root rot is a concern. The Andersons use a preventative fungicide every six weeks. "Normally we'd have thrown a hundred mums away by this point, and we're not even close to that number. Maybe 50. It's a good year," Greg says.

While many growers stick to four major colors, Greg and Mariah grow more than 30 colors of mums. She uses an iPad app to photograph and document the colors and types of mums they like (and don't like) throughout the growing season.

"If it doesn't work in our growing system — whether it's a color or a growing pattern — we eliminate it," Mariah adds. That includes mums that break easily during transport or are inconsistent growers.

The Andersons have found that what's popular industrywide is not necessarily what's popular in central Illinois. "Yellow is top, then they say purple," Mariah explains. "But in our area, it's the bicolors and unique varieties not typically found at major retailers. Then maybe maroon or purple. White is the least favorite, although we are supplying a wedding that wants 25."

Back in 2009, the Andersons' goal was to start small and determine price and

expenditures. Initial capital investments meant they didn't profit the first year.

Today, they sell 60% of their crop wholesale, to a handful of pumpkin farms and local stores. They sell another 20% through independent events like Bloomington's (Ill.) Third Sunday Market and the Clinton Apple & Pork Festival, and the remaining 20% through regular customers at their farm.

Mum help

Two years ago, the Andersons' young friend Raeann Huffman was looking for a recordbook project as a Clinton FFA member. She has worked with them ever since.

Additional labor is required twice a year, during planting and preplanting. Raeann and her mom often help fill pots and set up irrigation. "It's a mad rush for about two days," Mariah says.

Greg and Mariah both have day jobs, at Harvest Master and Illinois Farm Bureau, respectively. The next goal in their operation is to add bedding plants and produce, and possibly offer CSAs, or Community Supported Agriculture, which allows folks in town to invest in the operation and receive a basket of produce each week during the growing season. It's an expansion that would make the farm a full-time job for Greg, who grew up raising pumpkins and produce on a large scale.

"That was my FFA project," he says.

With so many plans and so many mums, Greg and Mariah are hard-pressed to choose a favorite mum color. If she has to choose, Mariah says she likes them all, but especially the two-toned orange and yellow mums.

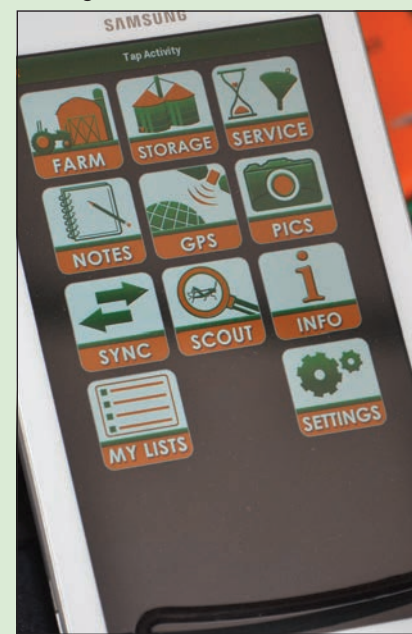
"I knew you'd say that!" Greg laughs. "My favorite is the yellow, because they're the most popular."

Good choice, especially if you're in the mum business.

WHAT'S **new**
from the shows

A 'smart' smartphone

FARMLOGIC takes its software applications for farming one giant step farther by introducing software for smartphones. The software will work on either an Android or Apple format. You can get it on your phone as an app, but you must first be a FarmLogic customer. The company calls this new feature FarmLogic SP. With the new smartphone app, you can greatly widen your recordkeeping options into a number of areas of the farm operation. Integrate everything from grain storage to seed selection. Learn more from FarmLogic, Murray, Ky., at 866-761-8001, or visit www.farmlogic.com.



Topcon AGI-4 receiver

TOPCON'S new AGI-4 receiver is the first ISO-compliant steering system, according to Joe Robertson, Topcon product marketing manager. It features multiple-constellation GNSS satellite reception, state-of-the-art inertial sensors and full terrain compensation. It has NTRIP capability, allowing operators to tap into an existing reference network via mobile phone connection. It is compatible with existing ISO11783 virtual terminal systems, for convenience on a wide range of machines. "Instead of having a separate console to control a planter and sprayer, you just have one console," Robertson says. For more information, call 925-245-8300, or visit www.topconpa.com.

