

Hildreth Morton:

Selling Herbs, Growing with the Times

A pleasant hillside with a beautiful view: That is the first impression of Bittersweet Hill Nurseries. The view is what attracted its owner to the property nearly 50 years ago. However, visitors today come not for the view but to purchase quality herbs or flowers or to choose from among 50 varieties of water lilies and lotus.

In 1940, Hildreth Morton and her husband purchased 120 acres of farmland in rural Davidsonville, MD. While her husband was employed off the farm, Hildreth took on the business of farming, beginning with a small chicken business and then venturing into hogs, cattle, tobacco, and then flowers. Now Bittersweet Hill boasts one of the best known herb plant inventories in the area.

Starting Small

The nursery started small, graduating to larger and larger operations as profits and demand allowed. The first small greenhouse was built at one end of a block building that contained the water tank and the furnace for the house. Hildreth sold petunias and other annual plants from this small greenhouse, using a cigar box to hold the money.

In the 1960's house plants were popular, so Bittersweet Hill supplied them, stressing quality and variety. As nearby housing developments came, the farm built its reputation and credibility in

by Corole S. Kerr, Small Farm Owner, Bowie, MD, and Howard W. (Bud) Kerr, Jr., Director, Office for Small-Scale Agriculture, Cooperative State Research Service, USDA, Washington, DC



"Herbs make 'scents and cents'" says Hildreth Morton of her business, Bittersweet Nurseries. For Morton, herbs have become a way of life. What most farmers regarded as a niche crop 10 years ago has quickly become a lucrative cash crop.

the community. As the money became available, Hildreth built more buildings; today there are three large glass greenhouses, one plastic greenhouse, one fiberglass Quonset hut for cooling, and a potting shed.

During the 1980's, the popularity of herbs increased, and they are now a major part of the business. Although it is primarily a retail business, Hildreth sells some herb plants wholesale to garden centers. She also has given herb plants to the National Arboretum (part of USDA's Agricultural Research Service) in Washington, DC.

A Going, Growing Concern

The nursery, which is open every day, is managed and staffed by women. Customers often comment on the helpful and knowledgeable assistance they get from the employees. The nursery features seasonal additions of fall and Christmas specialties, such as chrysanthemums, poinsettias, and live green wreaths.

Herbal weekends have been held annually for several years, featuring demonstrations, door prizes, and garden displays with plants for sale. They are well attended by local customers as well as by garden and herb clubs from neighboring States.



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All the employees of Bittersweet Nurseries are women. Here Hildreth and employees Elaine Lohn and Solly Listro tend to their herbs.



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Hildreth Morton working in her office, which is a desk and a bookshelf from floor to ceiling. Her knowledge of the plants she sells was acquired through continuous study, research, and experimentation.

the plants she sells—knowledge acquired through continuous study, research, and experimentation when no help was available. Business acumen, intuition, and common sense have kept this operation ahead of the current trends and have helped it survive growing competition and changing times. Hildreth goes on buying trips to find new varieties, makes appearances at community and State functions, and attends trade association meetings and seminars.

Ten years ago, most farmers regarded herbs as a niche crop, but they are becoming a more significant crop. The recent upsurge of interest in herbs may result from health-conscious consumers who choose fresh fruit and vegetables as the basis of their diet. Herbs, fresh and dried, add to this healthy profile. Growing and marketing all kinds of herbs, flowers, and ornamentals is becoming commercially feasible for all kinds of farmers in the 1990's.

The view from Bittersweet Hill now includes more houses, as well as the glistening roofs of competitors' greenhouses. Suburbia is encroaching. But Hildreth Morton will continue to operate her farm with an eye to the future. By offering plants of consistently high quality and by applying her insight into the business, she will maintain her small farm and grow with the times.

There is nothing glitzy about Bittersweet Hill; it is a place for serious gardeners. In one greenhouse is a garden and gift shop selling how-to books, a few good tools and supplies, decorative pots, and packets of seed varieties not usually found in drugstores. In addition to posted prices, there are neat hand-lettered signs giving plants' scientific and common names, planting information, cooking instructions, and often history or interesting facts. A sign on a pair of garden clippers reads, "A good pair of clippers is hard to find. We use these all the time."

Hildreth's trademark is the colorful flower she always wears in her hair. With a friendly and outgoing personality, she communicates a love of her farm and a wealth of knowledge about