

Fernau's Garden a family business with deep roots

Growing legacy began as farm in early Oshkosh

By Randy R. Domer
HERALD CONTRIBUTOR

When it comes to getting your hands dirty, one does not need to look too far around Oshkosh.

One person most of the locals know has his hands in the soil almost every day. Bob Fernau, owner of Fernau's Garden Center, has been farming and gardening for more years than you can shake a garden hoe at.

Fernau's greenhouses are hard to miss when you drive north out of town on County A just past Harrison Street. The garden center is on land that the Fernaus have farmed since 1853, the same year Oshkosh became incorporated as a city.

I visited Bob recently and coaxed him into putting down his watering hose and sitting down for a few minutes to tell his story.

"I am the fifth generation of Fernaus to work on this land," he said. "The 'first Fernau' was my great-great-grandfather who came here from Germany and purchased some acreage of land.

"His wife-to-be came to this area around the same time. She traveled from Omro to Oshkosh by oxcart and took the floating bridge to cross the Fox River. My great-great-grandfather was looking for a house keeper and when their paths crossed they decided to get married."

Stories handed down through the Fernau family over the years claim that Chief Oshkosh once stopped at the farm on his travels through the area. It was common back then for Native Americans to come to the farm to get milk and eggs – always bartering or trading items such as hand-made baskets made from willow branches.

In the 1880s, the railroad came to Oshkosh and the tracks heading north split the Fernau acreage in two.

"Our family were farmers and had dairy cattle as well. It was difficult getting the cows out to pasture as they had to cross the tracks without getting hit" he explained.

As a kid, Bob remembered one of his jobs on the farm was to see that the cows



Photos by Randy Domer

Fernau's Garden Center operates from the family farm that has been at that location since the 1850s.

got over the tracks.

"Cows only have one speed and trains cannot stop quickly. One time the last cow to cross did not make it."

The insurance adjuster apparently had a sense of humor and said to Bob's grandfather, Chas Fernau, "I suppose that cow was the best in the herd!" A quick glance from the elder Fernau confirmed, in fact, it was indeed.

The Fernaus lived in a large two-story, white farmhouse that always stood near the road's edge. It was originally moved from near the shore of Lake Winnebago in the 1850s to where it then stood until it was torn down about 10 years ago.

As farmers, the family planted an assortment of crops, including fruits and vegetables mainly for home use. They also had an orchard, so one year Bob's grandmother Ann got the idea to sell apples. They quickly discovered sales were so good that they added vegetables and eventually built a roadside stand.



Chas Fernau was also doing a little combining on the side for some extra cash, until he realized there was more money coming in from the roadside stand than riding the tractor all day. So, sometime in the 1950s, he took an old wood shed that stood on the property, built a lean-to on it and added glass. It would be the first greenhouse and a move that would serve the Fernau family well in the future.

The benefit of having a greenhouse was being able to start plants sooner, as the person who offered their produce first was able to get higher prices. Being first to the market meant people were willing to pay a little more.

Soon, customers that visited the roadside stand started asking to buy plants. So, plants were added to the mix. Bob recalled that at first plants were raised in hand-built cold frames made from wood, tar paper and old windows. As customers bought them, they were pulled from their growing bed by hand and wrapped in newspaper. Over time new greenhouses were added.

But managing the dairy business, milking cows twice a day, running the roadside market and managing the greenhouse plantings became too much for Bob's dad and grandfather. The dairy cows were sold, leaving only the roadside market and greenhouses to work. Eventually the decision was made to close the roadside market and focus solely on greenhouse plantings.

Today there are 11 greenhouses and most plants sold at Fernau's are planted

from seed by Bob himself. Some plants that are produced from cuttings are patented and must be purchased from a licensed grower. Years ago, Bob would propagate his own cuttings, but the practice is no longer allowed.

Most of us will have a day or two off work and even take a vacation occasionally. Bob works at his garden center seven days a week – and no vacation. What does he do in the winter months?

"After the summer growing season is winding down, we start on next year's business," Fernau said. "Starting in August we sterilize soil and used potting containers. Then in November, geranium cuttings come in and must be rooted. Then we begin stapling hundreds of cardboard flats that customers use to carry plants to the checkout.

"There are also various maintenance things that must be attended to," he added. The seeding process begins in late February or March.

During the spring peak season, an 80-hour-a-week cycle is not unusual for Bob. "I have a great team of about eight seasonal employees that help during the busy season with transplanting or selling. Otherwise, it's just my brother, Dick, and myself."

"The seed planting process is still done the old fashioned way, same as my dad and grandpa did it" Bob said. "It's still the most efficient use of space and time for a smaller operation like ours."

As one can imagine, watering is one of the biggest and most important jobs on site.

"We spend about five to six hours a day watering. In late spring, when temperatures start to get hotter, some greenhouses must be watered 2-3 times a day," Fernau said. "We have some greenhouses that we run drier to control the height of certain plants so they are not too large when planting time arrives."

There are dozens of tomato varieties available today, so I could not resist asking, "What is your favorite tomato variety and why?" His reply left me in stitches: "I hate tomatoes!" he said with a chuckle. His top three sellers are Big Boy, Early Girl and Jet Star.

Raising pumpkins is also a good part of the fall business at Fernau's. Pumpkins raised here are only sold to the public, not to retail outlets.

One of the benefits of buying local means there is always an expert on site to answer questions. When asked what the most common complaint is from customers, he said it's rabbits, deer and squirrels. How to prevent them? Build a fence and use wire fencing with small holes or the small rabbits will still get in.

I asked him how he competes with the local "big box" retailers.

"Quality is our No. 1 advantage. Keeping plants watered and in the right temperature environments produces strong, healthy plants," he said. "Some of the other places might pull someone from the automotive department and put them in their garden center. Things just don't get cared for as well. Also, we have the experience and knowledge to help people who have questions."

Asked about any plans to retire, Bob smiled and said, "It's always been the family tradition to die on the job, and I plan to continue that!"

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