

kinds of chemicals to stop a problem that's already started." Nowhere are bugs evident. "Some plants seem to attract bugs; others don't. We know which varieties they are and we stay on top of it. Again it's about the preventative sprays."

Most importantly, they keep the place spotless...not a wilted leaf or a shred of peat moss on the floor. Anthony says this obsession with cleanliness comes from his father, Gerrit van Hoven, "and it's filtered down to all of us and pretty much the whole company. He is a very neat person, and he always wants the place clean, as spic-and-span as possible."



Photos by Phil Audibert
It's not just poinsettias at this time of year. Battlefield Farms is also the first operation in America to propagate wholesale aquatic plants. This local greenhouse distributes pond plants to all Lowe's stores from the east coast to the Rocky Mountains!

It's not all poinsettias here at Battlefield Farms, or all mums, or all spring bedding plants; there are some interesting sidelines going on as well. Given that the van Hovens hail from Holland, they've started a brisk business in bulbs which they wholesale nationwide to catalog companies. They also import and distribute the components for the hand carts that move the plants from greenhouse to truck and from truck to retail space. And Battlefield Farms is the first in the nation to start a wholesale aquatic plants business, propagating and

shipping water lilies, oxygenators, marginals and floaters, "all for ponds." They outsource this special niche business in California, Oregon and Washington, but "everything from the Rockies east, we handle."

Outdoors, 500,000 hostas have recently bedded down for a long winter's nap. Anthony explains they become hardier if they go dormant at least once before being uprooted and sold. Same for peonies. He points off in the distance to an area that will soon be home to six acres of shade houses. He compares their \$2 a square-foot construction cost to the \$18 per foot for glass greenhouse. Doing the math on 30 acres of greenhouse, the head fairly swims with what this must have cost.

We walk into a new truck loading dock, still under construction. Anthony can't wait for this to be completed so he can free up his sowing and production areas from shipping. "As you can imagine, there's a lot of congestion." Battlefield Farms owns 40+ trailers, each bearing the company slogan: "Battlefield grown, Home shown." They keep six drivers on the payroll year-round, and seasonally, they hire independent tractor drivers to deliver their product.

"We have an exceptional growing staff. They do a phenomenal job." says Anthony barely containing his appreciation for his head grower, an affable chap named Mark Vedel. Vedel has four growers

undereath him, each responsible for seven to eight acres. If things happen on time such as "sticking" the cuttings, seeding, propagation, "then it makes their job much easier."

It would seem that making their job easier is Anthony's job. Back in his office, Anthony turns to his spreadsheets. \$30 million in sales last year...about 85 percent of that is to Lowe's and Wal-Mart; the rest to area food store chains and independent retailers.

But you may not find a Battlefields Farms poinsettia at the Lowe's in



Photos by Phil Audibert
Above, Battlefield Farms can hold as many as 600,000 plants in hanging baskets, freeing up valuable floor space. These poinsettias are on what's known as an "echo," a revolving system that brings each plant to a feeding station before moving on. Next spring these baskets will contain impatiens and petunias. Below, poinsettias as far as the eye can see. They come in six or seven different shades of red, plus pink, white, salmon, marbled and speckled. The local greenhouse operation has three major seasons: Christmas poinsettias, spring bedding plants, and chrysanthemums in the fall. They also raise perennials such as hostas and peonies.

Charlottesville or Culpeper. That's because of an end-around pulled by a huge outfit in Florida who promised Lowe's they would build greenhouses in Pennsylvania if Lowe's would give them Battlefield's lucrative mid-Atlantic market. Battlefield was forced to ship north... to western Pennsylvania and New York. "You drive four hours and you get to this other greenhouse that this place has. And they're driving four hours south to get to where we used to be, which is our own...back...door! And we're driving four hours to them and then four hours further on," grouses Anthony. Still, he sees this fuel and time-wasting experience as educational. "We've learned a lot," he says ruefully, adding with a glimmer that sometimes the local Lowe's stores call him up because they prefer his product to theirs. And Lowe's has reportedly told Battlefield "The more we

expand, they'll keep up with us." And so... they continually expand.

It's a good thing, however, that Battlefield hasn't put all its eggs in the Lowe's basket, because this is a risky business. Take Easter of last year. It was snowing, remember? "Nobody wants our pansies," shrugs Anthony. "You know it's a beautiful crop but we don't move anything when there's snow on the ground. It ends up the season moves on, you move into spring and you're stuck with them." They had to dump the beautiful pansies to make room for something else.

"High-risk, high-reward. That's the nature of this business...I like to think we've learned pretty well. We've had much more success than vice versa," says Anthony of this dynamic business. "It changes every year. There are always new things, new requirements, new plants, everything's new; so that keeps it interesting."



Your Christmas POINSETTIA



Photos by Phil Audibert
Top photo, one of 140 full-time employees Apolinar Castro places poinsettias that will soon ship to Lowes, Wal-Mart, and area chain grocery stores. In springtime, Battlefield's busiest season, the work force swells to 230. Above, Anthony van Hoven is already looking towards spring as he inspects flats of freshly seeded annuals that will be sold in March, April, May and early June as packs, flats, or hanging baskets. This coming spring, the 30-acre greenhouse will empty and refill two to three times. After that he'll get to work on seeding chrysanthemums. Before you know it, it'll be time to "stick" poinsettia cuttings again.

A cold front has just pushed through, bringing with it some much-needed rain. It's windy too and the temperature is plummeting. But your Christmas poinsettia sitting somewhere out in the middle of a sunken floor with about a million of its brothers and sisters, is quite happy thank you...well-fed, watered, warm, dry and comfy.

The rain that just beat down on this holiday plant was intercepted by a roof...a greenhouse roof, to be more precise, a greenhouse roof belonging to Battlefield Farms, on Clarks Mountain Road about halfway between Rapidan and Unionville.

This is no ordinary greenhouse. This greenhouse is 30

acres huge, that's right—30 times 43,560 square feet under roof. This place is so big, the head grower gets around on a bicycle! When production manager,

Right now at Battlefield Farms, it's poinsettias as far as you can see... acres and acres of them... 1 million all told in various stages of development timed to mature just as Christmas shopping fever hits its peak.

Anthony van Hoven wants something done, he has to call on a walkie talkie. When it rains here, as it just did, the run off from this roof numbers in the millions of gallons. And here's the beauty of it; all that rainwater is diverted to two holding ponds, pumped, filtered, treated with chlorine, and sent to holding tanks indoors, where a computer tells it to flood a certain bay, and... your Christmas poinsettia gets a nice drink of water.

Your Christmas poinsettia was born as a cutting in Central America. It was rooted or "stuck"



Photo by Phil Audibert

Before leaving on a tractor trailer truck, each poinsettia is labeled with Battlefield Farms' name and address so the customer knows exactly where it came from. This batch is either bound for a Lowe's, or a Wal-Mart. It might even wind up in the Food Lion in Orange or Gordonsville.

in Canadian peat moss and fertilizer right here in Orange County this past summer. Depending on which part of this massive complex it is located in, its home is either a pot on the floor or a basket hanging from the ceiling. Either way, it has been fed, watered, and given meds. And if the weather is really nice, they'll even open the roof so your poinsettia can get a breath of fresh air.

"Any plant will grow better outside in its natural growing environment," says van Hoven. "They're actually much stronger and healthier than if you grow them just in greenhouse light. The beauty of having an open roof greenhouse is if it's a crummy day or bad weather, you shut the roof and you make it a perfect temperature inside." Van Hoven's piercing blue eyes soften a tad. He raises his voice so all the plants can hear. "I expect nothing but happy plants here," he announces, then turns and asides, "They have no excuse. We give them everything they want and," he says raising his voice again, "all we ask in return is that they be a good looking plant for us."

A million poinsettias faintly nod in agreement. "Deal," they seem to say.

When it's time, this plant will be given a name (bar code and greenhouse name and address), wrapped in snowflake-printed clear plastic, loaded onto a metal hand cart, rolled into a tractor trailer and delivered to a Lowe's, or a Wal-Mart, or Food Lion, Kroger, Giant, Safeway or Meadows Farms probably near you. And then you will have to make a decision. Which of these six or seven different shades of red, or the less traditional colors: pink, white, salmon, marbled or speckled, will become your poinsettia? And when you have made that decision, you will load it into your shopping cart and take it home for the holidays, where it will dazzle everyone, including Santa when he comes down the chimney.

If you care for it, water it and keep it warm, it should last all winter as a house plant...a fitting end to the story of your Christmas poinsettia.

Battlefield grown, home shown



At left, Battlefield Farms head grower, Mark Vedel (right) confers with one of his four growers, Maury Mairs (left) and Maury's assistant Laura Calles. Each grower is responsible for seven to eight acres of greenhouse. Below, Most of Battlefield Farms employees are documented immigrants. Here, a crew applies bar codes to pots containing Diamond Frost. Soon, a smaller pot bearing a poinsettia will be placed in the middle of each of these larger pots.

Photos by Phil Audibert

Right now at Battlefield Farms it's poinsettias as far as you can see....acres and acres of them...one million all told in various stages of development timed to mature just as Christmas shopping fever hits its peak. But on Anthony van Hoven's desk the spreadsheets are all about impatiens and petunias. Heck, the poinsettias are pretty much on auto pilot; it's time to think about spring.

"That's where we focus most of our energy and attention," says this intense young man with the piercing blue eyes, the middle son of the Dutchman who started all this. "You're always a season ahead of the season that you're planning for." He shuffles through computer printouts. "We know what we need to get, we know how much we put into the product, labor and cuttings and dirt and chemicals and growing material."

Asked, "just what is it that you do here, he unhesitatingly responds, "all types of annuals that you can think of in all types of different sizes, baskets, packs." He shuffles through the papers and mutters, "There's 300,000, 500,000, a bunch of 50,000. Then you get to baskets and you're looking at 600,000, hmmm, 1,560,000 of the packs....just the four-inch square pots alone for Lowe's you're looking at doing 1 million, 500,000." He's looking at production predictions from March through early June. After that, well, it's time to "stick" the mums! Before you know it, it's back to poinsettias again.

Already they are germinating seed for this spring crop...tiny little flats, barely an inch square, each harboring somebody's hanging basket or potted annual for next April and May. "There's no stoppage. You switch out, switch the new thing in and just keep on trucking," says Anthony. He barks orders in Spanish into his cell phone which doubles as a handheld radio. In this busy spring season, "We'll try to fill the greenhouse up and empty it at least two to three times!"

The workforce will swell from 140 full-time to 230, "90 percent Hispanic." All signs are bilingual; so are most of the supervisors. "Right now the law requires that they have a social security number and a valid I.D. If they don't have that...sorry," he arches his eyebrows, shrugs and holds his hands palms up. "But if they do have that, then by law right now, the only reason to turn them away is if they don't fulfill the position. Whatever the law states, then we make sure that we do it."

"echoes," so named because they keep coming back. An electric eye tells the echo to stop while a tube feeds and waters the plant before moving it along its way.

Overhead, they can accommodate 600,000 hanging baskets, freeing up room on the floor for pots and packs. In the newer sections, mature potted plants sit by the thousand in bays three inches below floor level. Anthony points out that the overhead booms "would take forever to get the water through this foliage into the dirt to the roots.

So you flood them and it sucks it up from the bottom of the pot...a thousand times more effective and much easier, and way less wasteful." The rainwater that was reclaimed from the roof is itself recycled.

Plants are kept warm by hot water pipes embedded in the cement floors. The older sections of the greenhouse are roofed in plastic; the newer sections in glass. "It's a little more expensive, but it has a lot of benefits...Obviously the light coming through is much clearer. Also the last 12 acres we've added on, the roof can open up all the way." And if a thunderstorm comes within 10 miles, a radar weather station automatically tells the roof to close 60 percent. If it comes closer, it will gradually close the remaining 40 percent.

All that glass conjures up adages about people living in glass houses and not throwing stones. Do they have breakage? "Not so many things falling out of the sky as expansion and contraction," responds

Anthony, thoughtfully. "You get too much pressure and glass will break. A pane will pop out here and there." Occasionally confused birds "definitely get lost if they get in here, but we don't really have a problem with birds coming in."

Disease is thwarted by pre-emptive chemical strikes. They routinely spray everything with root and plant shield. Although this scatter gun approach is expensive, "it has proven to be a smart investment because it saves us all



A family affair

You might say the Dutch know a thing or two about growing flowers. So, it comes as no surprise that the Gerrit van Hoven family has made such a success out of the wholesale plant propagation business in this country. It runs in their blood.

Anthony's mother's family is still in the business in Holland; his maternal uncle operates a similar greenhouse complex in Charlotte, NC. Anthony's father, when he first immigrated to this country, apprenticed and learned the business from his father-in-law. He purchased the Orange County business from his brothers-in-law in 1990 when it was just six acres under roof.

In November of 1999, fire ignited an overhead shade cloth that was closed to keep the heat in. It melted the plastic roof and burned up the crop below. "Pretty much the whole place burned down," says Anthony van Hoven. "And it's been rebuilt from there. The Lord blessed us a lot and we've doubled the size since before the fire and we're still growing."

The reference to God does not slip past unnoticed. The entire van Hoven family is deeply religious. Anthony and a younger brother help their father run the business; two older brothers are part-timers, preferring to devote the rest of their time to their ministries.

Just read Battlefield Farms' mission statement.

"Battlefield Farms is dedicated to glorifying God, bringing honor to His name and reflecting His character in our work and deeds. We strive to show this in our dealings with the people we come in contact with, helping the less fortunate in our community and in our outreach to third-world countries."

On the lunch room door is posted the announcement that every Thursday morning, from 7:00 to 7:30 employees are invited to bible study, conducted in English by one of Anthony's Baptist pastor brothers. On Fridays it's conducted in Spanish. "Obviously it's not mandatory, but our employees get to clock in. It's not like they're missing hours or pay. They get paid if they sit there; they get paid if they go to work. We want to give them every opportunity possible to hear the

Word." They even make every effort to give their workers Sunday off so they can attend church, even during the hectic spring season.

The van Hovens have put their money where their mouth is, supporting numerous missions around the world, in particular a 60-year-old ministry in the Venezuelan jungle. Family members visit in person at least twice a year; they even send logistical support such as electricians and plumbers to help with mission construction projects. And apparently, Venezuela's upstart socialist dictator, the "anti-Christian" Hugo Chavez, has backed off on making life difficult for these folks who are making such a difference in the lives of the indigenous people.

Missionary work is not new to the van Hovens. When Anthony was a youngster his parents moved to Haiti to help run a ministry founded by Anthony's maternal grandfather. The goal was to "teach the locals to grow tomatoes, different crops to feed themselves. He believed that until they could meet their physical needs of hunger, they won't focus so much on their spirit. So we tried to teach them and help them with that."

Anthony himself is one of seven brothers and a sister, most of whom are involved with the family business, including a brother who owns American Color, another greenhouse operation in southeastern Orange County. Another brother who owns a nursery in Thorn Hill. There are two clues about Anthony that belie the image of the stereotypical bible thumper. One: he wears a red jersey with the name of Brazilian soccer star, Ronaldinho on the back. That can mean only one thing; he is mad about "the beautiful game," he plays every chance he gets.

The other dead giveaway? Huge framed photos in his office of beaches and surfers catching gargantuan waves. "I love to surf," he says passionately, admitting he dreams of waves in Costa Rica, Puerto Rico...even went to Hawaii once, but the weather was calm. "I'm a beach bum. Whenever I can, I like to go to the beach. If I get a chance to surf, that's awesome."