

Plant Exchange

Summer Every Day

Take A Look Inside The Mensch Greenhouse

Share tips from your outdoor or indoor plant experience, give us a tour of your plant site, or just let us know what you enjoy most about the plants and people who grow them. Contact news@yankton.net Attn: Brenda Johnson or write to P&D, 319 Walnut St., Yankton, SD 57078, Attn: Brenda Johnson.

BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON

P&D Correspondent

The public seldom gets the chance to see where plants they select in a garden center are grown. In this commercial greenhouse tour you may hear a bit of what it's like in this plant business, find growing tips from a professional, and experience this grower's standards.

Korey Mensch and his father Lyle are co-owners of Mensch Greenhouse, Inc., in Avon, SD. They ship their plant crops to independent garden center and grocery store clients throughout South Dakota and Nebraska, and a bit into Iowa and Minnesota. "Color Your World" pots with rainbows are their trademark.

Mensch Greenhouse grows and supplies annual bedding plants, baskets, planters, window boxes, perennials, woody plants, and ornamental grasses. Their niche market clients ask for many kinds of plants, but growing the wide range of plants presents challenges. They have many crops with different growing requirements. In fact, the business has several specialty greenhouses with two and a half acres under roof.

The commercial operation employs thirty-six workers at peak season, mostly from the Avon area. About a third are high school students who work on Saturdays and after school. Korey, thirty-eight, has worked in the greenhouse business all his life, and has loyal employees that pre-date him.

We step into a half-acre year-round greenhouse world, leaving icy winds of early spring behind. Plants fill the benches and baskets of green fill the roof space. Locals in Avon, a small town with population around 625, know of this business that has evolved since the 1960's, but not all have seen it up close. Even avid gardeners who toured the greenhouse from Tyndall, the next town east, were surprised at the scope of this business nearby, according to Mensch.

"Summertime every day," Mensch said. "In a year like this, it costs a lot to keep it summertime." He refers to the sharp rise in propane gas for heating the greenhouses. "We hope to be able to absorb the costs. If [garden center] customers have a price increase, then the end consumer has to pay more." The greenhouse supplies plants and hopes the demand is there.

One of the big challenges to this grower is timing. "May 2nd is always the same day on the calendar every year and we gear for it. But in 2012, people wanted plants in April because the weather was nice. Plants have a shelf life. To get everything timed out, [now] is my biggest window." For June he times plants in steps for shipment later in the season. "Because it's a long season, I rather have my crops on the small side than anything overgrown."

Supplying spring bedding flowers and vegetable plants to a large geographic region is a challenge. "Rapid City is maybe a week earlier than Sioux Falls, but on a given year, we could be selling plants in Sioux Falls and getting snow in Rapid City. When we delivered plants up to the North Dakota border last year, water still had three feet of ice."

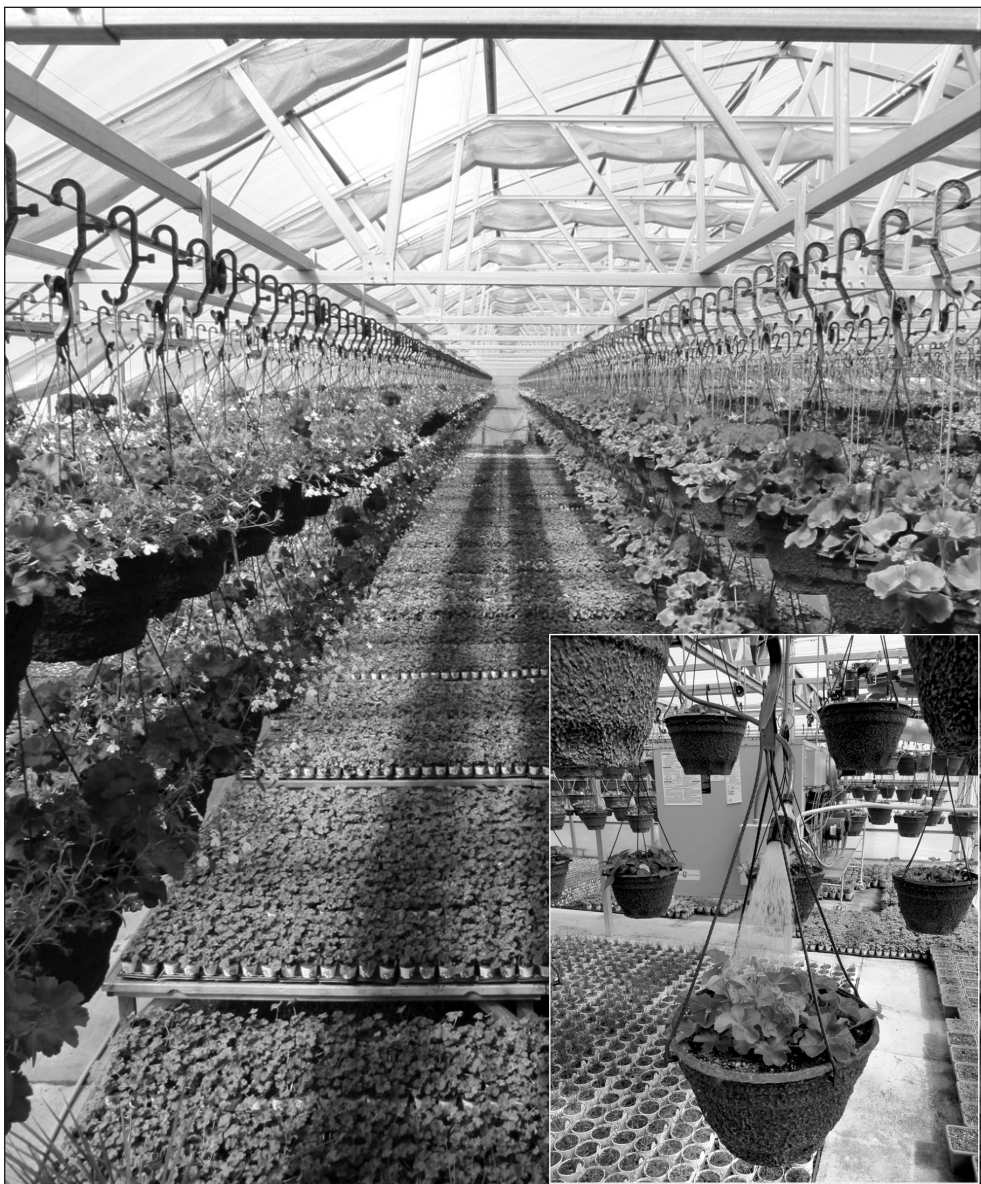
WHAT GROWS HERE DOESN'T STAY HERE

Calibrachoa [mini trailing petunias or million bells] are our Number One ten-inch basket," Mensch said. Several colors and calibrachos in four-inch pots are also available.

"The first two years we grew calibrachoa, I had bad information. Iron and fertilizer needs were intensive. We took a couple of years off and looked around for better genetic varieties. All the companies have better genetics now. Calibrachoa are easy to grow now because they fit with what we do right for everything else. Some [growers] still have trouble growing them. We have a good source, an excellent transplanting crew that take care to plant them not too deep and not too shallow."

In the specialty greenhouse before us are rows and columns of four inch pots of calibrachoa, all bright green and the same compact size, all with their tags aligned to the right like a regiment of tiny soldiers as they grow ready for planting.

"[Annual flower and vegetable] bedding plants are our Number One product. My flats are more uniform than anyone else's," Mensch said. "That's what



Space is a premium even in this half-acre Mensch, Inc. greenhouse. Two levels of hanging baskets in the roof area receive sunlight, along with bench plants beneath. Baskets are automatically watered and fertilized on a conveyor like a horizontal chair lift system. Instead of a timer, when to water is determined by number of sunny days in a row. Pots on the floor far below are grouped by water needs and hand-watered when dry. (Photos: Brenda K. Johnson)

I'm about. I want the last flat as good as the first flat." Gardeners often appreciate plants of the same size or maturity in landscape projects or gardens.

Lantana is a hardy sun-loving plant that has increased in popularity over the years. "We grow lots more of it now. It keeps mosquitos away. It comes in pink, orange, red, rose and purple," Mensch said. His tropical greenhouse has rows and rows of lime green and dark sweet potato vines, dragon wing begonias, and banana trees in pots.

Pansies, snapdragons, dianthus, and dusty miller grow in cooler conditions in another greenhouse. Large containers in greenhouse storage there will soon be filled with blooming flowers for Avon Main Street. Mensch will see that the pots are tended all summer.

Mensch is attuned to social media and gets special requests about plants mentioned for plant projects. "Pinterest may be spurring interest in plants. I get calls for certain plants. Last mid-season, Proven Winners' 'Blue My Mind', which has a striking blue flower had a lot of calls. We now have extras of this flower."

His Facebook friends ask him: What is kale and what do I do with it? "I've been eating it my whole life," he said, and mentioned ornamental and edible kale variety bedding plants they grow.

Some popular or hot items may be harder to grow. "Gerbera daisies are so much eye candy that people can't resist them. But they are for the right spot in the right yard," he said. "For the true gardener that loves to tend plants, their palate's wide open when they walk into a greenhouse. They want to care for plants and know where to plant it."

Casual gardeners find matches of time and effort to their interest with other plants. "Petunias, moss roses, and [annual] vinca are bullet proof and will look good almost no matter how you treat them," he said.

BLENDING HAND WORK AND AUTOMATION

"We [Korey and his father] micro-manage everything," Mensch said. "I have to know what everyone's doing at all times. We stay in control of when water goes on and off. No timers. Everything here is weather dependent. If we've had three sunny days in a row, it's time to check the baskets."

Various sizes of hanging baskets are grouped to fill the roof area of the greenhouse. They're hung at two levels for maximum light and use of space. Baskets rotate on a chain system like a horizontal chair lift to receive an automatic shot of water and fertilizer.

"When we plant, we don't keep the soil wet. We let the soil dry out between waterings. This basket is dry. It shows me by the color of the leaf that it is dry [a touch of gray] and time for water. You produce more roots when you stress the young plant and less disease takes hold," he said.

"We collect rain water from our greenhouse roof gutters (21,000 sq. ft.) and run it into a cistern. Since we haven't had measurable rain this winter, we splash rural water into the cistern." Gardeners sometimes rest an open bucket of water overnight to release the chlorine gas before watering plants.

A shade cloth over the greenhouse roof blankets the building at night in early spring and keeps the air during the day in summer. Roof vents help circulate air.

All the flats, pots, and window boxes are filled consistently with soilless mixture using what they call a "dirt machine". "Peat, perlite, bark, and vermiculite are in the soilless mixture for water-holding capacity," Mensch said.

"Seventy-five cu. ft. bags of the mixture are hoisted up and contents are dropped into a hopper. Chain system under the hopper moves containers along to receive fluffed soilless mixture and the tops of all filled containers are leveled off."

Many plants are hand transplanted but automation is used on some plants. "We work with so many petunias that we use a transplant machine that plants forty eight plants at a time. Workers check to make sure all the plants are planted just right, put the tags in, and take them to the greenhouse to grow. Impatiens plants bend over and break with this machine. That's not acceptable at Mensch Greenhouse."

"With the exception of a large greenhouse, there's no need to over-automate everything," he said. "We've got great help. It costs money but the money is great for a small town. My friends in the industry, when their machine goes down, they're flat out of production."

FROM WHEN THIS STARTED UNTIL NOW

His grandmother, Ada Mensch began arranging flowers for special occasions in her Avon flower club as a hobby. "My grandfather Phillip ran the elevator in Avon. He was advised to cut the stress out of his life and get out of the business. He and Ada went to a greenhouse exposition about 1956 and ended up purchasing a greenhouse. That's how the business started. My father Lyle graduated from high school in 1960 and went to SD School of Mines & Technology but came back to grow the greenhouse business after his father died."

In those days, there were no packs and flats and basket industry, according to Mensch. "No refrigerated trucks or fast airplanes to ship flowers to rural areas. They grew cut flowers for their flower shop. Lyle and local partners tried to grow hydroponic tomatoes but it didn't last long. Quality of tomatoes grown indoors was the downfall of that project," he said.

Now gardeners can purchase plants at the retail Mensch Flower Shop in Avon run by Mensch's cousin Carol Tolsma. Mensch Greenhouse, Inc. handles commercial clients.

Asked what his business is known for, Mensch responds, "I'd like to think it's the overall quality. Twenty years ago, if you had petunias, geraniums, marigolds, and pansies, you had a greenhouse. We're doing so many different things now. No one major crop is more important than others. Customers tell how beautiful everything is. I see the corner of that tray that needs to be watered. If there are plants we can't grow right, I don't want to grow them. Not everything we do here is perfect. I don't want to pass my mistake on the next fellow."

What does Mensch like most about his profession as a greenhouse grower? "I can fit all the hell of one year into the first six months." As soon as this season ends late June, Mensch begins orders for next season. He makes adjustments with suppliers and looks for new plants. He repairs and replaces. He sheds commitments to customers. "Then the only commitment is to myself. And it frees me up for hunting season."

May Plant Tips

Diane Dicks, owner of Diane's Greenhouse, off Highway 81 in Fordyce, NE (402) 357-3754, often gets customer questions about new examples of annual plants that are right for the sun or shade conditions at your site.

- For annual plants for sunny locations, I'm a big fan of "Supertunias" by Proven Winners. They offer a lot of color and grow large, with little care. They need extra fertilizer, so add "Daniels" fertilizer 3 times / week for great flowers. Sanvitalia, Scaevola and Angelonia are all excellent choices for sun containers. They love the heat and will thrive in the hot sun.

- For an example of annual plants that thrive in shade, if you haven't tried the new begonia, "Gryphon," this is a must try. As a shade plant, it will get EXTRA large. Another for shade is Oxalis, "Charmed Wine." Its burgundy color contrasts nicely with shade impatiens.

- Fairy gardens or miniature gardens are a craze. With or without plants, they make a great gift for any one of any age. Many plant miniature succulents in their fairy gardens. These are sun-loving plants and are one of the easiest plants to keep alive.

- Grafted tomatoes are sun-loving plants. Grafted tomato offers less disease issues, a bigger plant, and more fruit. Remember not bury the graft.

- To get a great looking container of flowering plants, start with a good quality potting soil that has some bark, perlite, and peat moss. It should not look like all peat moss. At the greenhouse we use "Pro Mix" in everything we plant.

Dibbles & Bits

- Fieldstone or other rock gardens can give a distinctive Northern Plains definition to even a small space with natural stones as specimens among which you can plant drifts of color. Fieldstones, if single stones are large enough or smaller stones are stacked, can create micro-climates in a small space. For example, on the south side of the stone, plant arid grasses or forbs, and on the north side plant evening primroses which require a bit more moisture. See "Rock Gardening with Kirk Fieseler" video to see and hear more details at http://plantselect.org/2014/02/rock-gardeningwithkirkfieseler/?utm_source=Happy+April++spring%27s+not+fooling+us+yet%21&utm_campaign=2014+April+1&utm_medium=email

- Last month an idea for a homemade self-watering plant container included a wrong source for used plant pots: Yankton Transfer Station. A reader kindly clued me that the Yankton Transfer Station collects #1 or #2 plastic for recycling to send to Vermillion or disposes of #3 - #7 containers. Same for Vermillion. Neither are public sources for used plant containers. Among rummage sales in the Yankton area this weekend are sources. If you have used plant containers to sell or give away, be sure to post them.

Plant Exchange: Blog With Us!

This blog is about plants and people who grow them in our USDA Zone 4-5a region. You will find plant topics featuring our gardeners and professionals who share about plants, with space to comment if you wish. Here are recent posts:

- Gardener uses tropical plants in containers for outdoor room.
 - Yankton's tree legacy continues.
 - Yankton community garden Healthy Yankton organizers share about volunteer efforts behind last season.
 - Professional grower gives plant tips.
 - Want to see what's blooming here and in England or Florida? See "Garden Bloggers Bloom Day" on May 15th link.
- Check our blog at: <http://brendakjohnsonplantexchange.wordpress.com/>



PHOTO: BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Zinnias, selected as a 'tried and true' favorite, can be direct seeded in a flowerbed in spring in our region. After maturity, zinnas will flower until frost.

'Tried and True' Flowers, Vegetables

Thanks to area garden club members of the region who share their experience with flowers or vegetables that are "tried and true."

- Summer Wine Ninebark is a perennial shrub I have thoroughly enjoyed. I was attracted to the unique dark crimson-red foliage that stays that shade all season. It has red stems and delicate pinkish-white flower clusters and adds great contrast against green foundation plants. It is easy to maintain and very hardy. Cut stems are great to use in fresh flower arrangements. — **Twila Burwitz** of the Pasque Garden Club

- Double 'Knock Out' Rose is one of my favorite

perennial plants. Mine bloomed profusely all summer last year. The first one I planted three years ago has grown to about four feet tall and wide. It is hardy to our zone and deadheading is optional. — **Lea Gustad** of the Pasque Garden Club

- Zinnias are tried and true annuals. They bloom even in hot, dry, summer heat. There are many gorgeous colors and flower types of zinnias. — **Connie Jensen** of Gayville in the Pasque Garden Club

- Gerbera or African Daisy is an annual I like. I have enjoyed it outside all summer. In the fall, I brought it in the house and treated it as a houseplant. It has re-

warded me with about 5-3" red blossoms in January when the snow is still flying. I learned that propagation is best by division because the seeds don't stay viable very long. My plant has 5 crowns and I plan to divide it in April, which is the recommended time to do so. — **Charlotte Miller** of the Pasque Garden Club

- Ajuga (Bugle Weed) is a tried and true perennial. I put in small plants years ago.

It always comes back in dense green leaves and crowds out weeds. It is pretty in the spring every year. I love the purple color of the blooms and the burgundy color in the leaves is all season long. It also is a low-growing plant. — **Linda Richards**, Yankton Town and Country Garden Club

- Iris is my favorite flower and it is a perennial. I have always loved the gorgeous

colors and the graceful shape of the Iris. My mother grew them in her Iris garden, so I guess the tradition has stayed in the family. — **Ruth Williams** of the Pasque Garden Club

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