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EARLY SPRING 2016

I usually begin my Facebook postings with the statement “We are still married” accompanied with a photo of Dianne and me standing out in the middle of the daylily field while it is in full bloom. That way there is proof that we are still married and that we are still in the nursery business. Therefore I will start this newsletter by stating that we are in business and plan on staying that way until the kids start sending money home to us.

The value of inventory in pots and trays on hand is \$12 million and that is assuming that we will sell everything we have, that it is alive after the over-wintering it, and that things will not be deeply discounted. We are used to making statements such as this about the value of our inventory because several times a year we take a shower, put on clean clothes, scrape the mud off our shoes, and go to see our banker where we tell him that exact same story. We are working on two assumptions; one is that one or the other of us has an honest looking face, and the second is that the banker has not been lied to before. For some reason I am reminded of the ethical question: is it really a lie if the teller knows for an absolute fact that the listener does not believe a word of it? Anyhow, we can discuss ethics later on and at great length because right now we want to sell some plants.

Here is a short update on our business. Two years ago, February 2014, Mike Edelbach told us he was going to back out of the buy-well agreement we had with him to sell the nursery to him. There had been too much recession, too much stress, not enough time with the kids, and not enough money. Our agreement had made provision for such a possibility with a one year notice, the training of a replacement, and the payment of a percentage of the equity Mike had built up in the business. Mike stayed on for the year and because of the employment contract was in full control during that time. He volunteered to stay on during the spring shipping season to make certain that went smoothly. Spring 2015 shipping was a great success.

In February 2015 after many interviews with many people we hired Collin Ruckle, formerly of Warner-Kingwood over in Ohio, to be manager. We promised one year of employment and so Collin was here until February 2016 when he returned to his former job in Texas and with a promotion and a raise. Collin helped us with the transition, both of management and of business model.

Transitions of the type we went through in the last two years are intrinsically difficult. I am thus pleased to report that we parted with both Mike and Collin on good terms. That may have been helped by us keeping up our ends of the bargain and it may have been helped by the professionalism shown by both Mike and Collin. The miracle is that we are still here and well positioned to do plant business in 2016.

We have learned a few things from the experience. We are starting to realize that we may need to take over nursery management in the future at any time. Therefore we are going to keep more control of the business, Dianne and I, with the main goal of having a business model simple enough for us to manage. We are starting to figure out that we are

getting older every year. We are still getting over the shock of this realization.

Here are some of the changes being made, to use the passive tense, and the new improved economy has given us several options. We think we are being coldly rational in this decision making business although sometimes just plain old personal bias may influence the decisions and that may be why we are dropping regular old-fashioned *Pachysandra terminalis*. We have enough cuttings beds of Green Carpet *Pachysandra* to stick ten million a year whenever the market develops for that amount. Years ago I got bored with *pachysandra* propagation and so I stuck magnolias and viburnums and lilacs and anything I could find just for the sheer joy of putting roots onto a twig. These days my suffering from boredom has been over-shadowed by a desire to have some golden years, so we are seriously into the *pachysandra* business. As said, we are digging up our regular *terminalis* beds and no longer growing the plant. We do not want to get things mixed up. Do not despair, for those with no taste we still offer the 'Green Sheen' and 'Silveredge' versions of *pachysandra*.

I have made a similar decision in regards to *Vinca minor*. We had been buying in some of the wild collected stuff from Tennessee and because of the aforementioned innate bias we are no longer doing that. We have a customer or two who prefer the regular *Vinca minor* because of a perception of greater vigor. I am thinking that this perception may have come from an incident of some fifteen years ago when we drenched way too much fungicides on our *Vinca* 'Bowles' field stock beds one spring thus stunting the plants for a year. We have not had that problem since. I think that our 'Bowles' and 'Dart's Blue' are vigorous growers these days, although I am not a landscaper and would not have direct experience in their growth when planted out.

I have finally figured out how to propagate *Vinca*. There is a trick to it that is counter-intuitive. While the reader might think that I would be happy and cheerful about this new-found skill that is not the case. I keep thinking about where we would be in the path of life had I figured this out twenty-five years ago. Let us just say that I would be sitting on my yacht somewhere in the Caribbean sipping out of a glass with a little umbrella in it instead of sitting here

in a Michigan winter pounding on the typewriter. Having lots of rooted cuttings of *vinca* does not mean that we have lots to sell as it needs to be transplanted into a pot of some kind to sell. We will be working on that problem next. At least we have lots of little plants.

Speaking of *Vinca minor*, there is a nomenclature problem going on here. First of all some people call 'Bowles' 'La Grave' which is, we think, a term coming out of Great Britain and it means the same plant. My father obtained his 'Bowles' from the old Spring Hill Nursery out of Tipp City, Ohio sometime in the mid-1960's. Spring Hill sold every which a kind of plant, shrubs and groundcovers, and we think they got their starts from Great Britain and then built up the stock. These days many nurseries get their *vinca* from Central America in the form of little tiny tip cuttings that root from the stem whereas normal well-adjusted *vinca* only roots from the nodes. Herein, we think, is the start of a problem. The typical 'Bowles' and also its improved form 'Dart's Blue' has a large nearly round leaf with a crinkly texture. As the plant matures the leaf form changes to be more nearly like the wild *vinca* with a longer narrower leaf. Thus the round crinkly form must be the juvenile form.

And so now we have two things that we do not know: we do not know if the Central American cuttings come from true 'Bowles' stock or not or if they are just the mature form. We were not there when the first stock plants were shipped down there. Secondly, we have no idea who came up with the name 'Cunningham's Bowles' or alternatively 'Bowles' Cunningham Blue' and what that means. What we do know is that for many years the best small ground-cover nursery in the country was Cunningham Gardens out of Waldron, Indiana. This is somewhere near Indianapolis and thus is geographically close to Tipp City, Ohio. They used to offer 'Bowles' and one year we sold them a bunch of rooted cuttings trays of our 'Bowles'. We assume that their Bowles and our Bowles are the same thing. When we find out what really has happened you will be the first to know.

While we are selling *vinca* I want to mention 'Ralph Shugert', a white edged Bowles that Dave McKenzie from Hortech discovered, named, patented, and that now has an expired patent. The plant is easy to propagate, healthy, does not revert, and, in consequence, it is something we have way too much of.

Exhausted as we are by the *vinca minor* discussion I will roll right on into the *Calamintha nepeta* discussion. I was recently visiting with Mike Yanny, an old acquaintance from years of International Plant Propagators Society meetings, and found out what apparently everyone else already knew—that Mike had named *Calamintha* ‘Montrose White’. This plant had started out being a regular *C. nepeta* and was such a good flowerer and all that Mike thought it needed a name to give it cultivar status. We have lots of ‘Montrose White’ and some ‘White Cloud’ although the rumor is that ‘White Cloud’ reseeds all over the place and is thus not a good plant in the landscape. Being that we are in the business of supplying plants for the landscape that is not a good sign. We are busy building up our stock of the ‘nepeta nepeta’ and will offer that next year. We think that the difference is that the latter is more of a blue bloomer.

‘*Calamintha nepeta nepeta*’ brings up a sensitive subject—that of information gathering. We, here in the Heartland of America out in rural Berrien County away from the hustle and bustle of big cities, are dependent on our customers for new hot plant information and so we encourage our customers to tell us, exactly three years before a plant becomes popular so that we can build up sufficient field stock, which new varieties are going to be in demand. The corollary to this plea for new plant information is that it be accurate and that we do not get incorrect information, such as was given me many years ago by the late Wolfgang Oehme, about how I would get rich growing *Silphium perfoliatum*. I am reminded of that bit of free advice every time I drive past my really lush planting, jungle-like even, of this cup plant, all ten feet of it.

Requesting feedback information from customers is not without its hazards. As an example, last summer we received several scathing emails from one of our good customers because we were out of some popular plant varieties, *Sedum Autumn Joy*, as I recall, was one of them. While I appreciate the concern of the customers we do not need to be reminded when we are out of a plant; we already know that because we are having difficulty walking around the office because of blurry vision from all of the tears in our eyes. We spend years advertising and staying up all night loading trucks and knocking our-

Here is the listing of #1 grasses and carexes that we stored in poly houses last winter. They should be alive.

<i>Calamagrostis</i> a. ‘Eldorado’		
PP 16,486	#1	200
<i>Calamagrostis</i> a. ‘Overdam’	#1	500
<i>Carex</i> h. ‘Evergold’	#1	1,400
<i>Carex</i> m. ‘Ice Dance’	#1	1,000
<i>Carex pensylvanica</i>	#1	700
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	#1	1,000
<i>Festuca</i> g. ‘Boulder Blue’	#1	300
<i>Festuca</i> g. ‘Elijah Blue’	#1	200
<i>Imperata</i> c. ‘Red Baron’	#1	600
<i>Miscanthus</i> s. ‘Gracillimus’	#1	1,200
<i>Miscanthus</i> s. ‘Morning Light’	#1	500
<i>Miscanthus</i> s. ‘Variegatus’	#1	200
<i>Miscanthus</i> s. ‘Zebrinus’	#1	500
<i>Panicum</i> v. ‘Heavy Metal’	#1	1,500
<i>Panicum</i> v. ‘Prairie Sky’	#1	400
<i>Panicum</i> v. ‘Rotstrahlbusch’	#1	1,700
<i>Panicum</i> v. ‘Shenandoah’	#1	1,400
<i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i>	#1	500
<i>Pennisetum</i> a. ‘Hameln’	#1	10,000
<i>Pennisetum</i> a. ‘Red Head’	#1	300
<i>Schizachyrium</i> s. Blue Heaven™		
(‘MinnblueA’ PP 17,310)	#1	500
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>		
(aka <i>Andropogon scoparius</i>)	#1	2,000
<i>Sesleria autumnalis</i>	#1	5,000

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selves out to get a good reputation so that customers will call us placing an order. The investment has been long-since spent by the time we get calls from the customer. Not being able to fill the order is an economic dead loss and besides the psychological trauma to us we have irritated a customer.

The other problem with running out of plants is that the customer will conclude that we will always be out of the same plant. In matter of fact, the opposite is true. We are so traumatized by the experience that we greatly over-produce whichever plant we were short of so the next year we are swimming it in.

All in all, information is good. Preferably we will get useful information, which brings up the even more sensitive subject of our prices. Sometimes our customers, in a fit of optimism thinking that we care about their thoughts, send us emails pointing out comparison prices between Twixwood and our good fellow nursery personages. I do not want to belabor the point but we already know what our prices are relative to the market; being reminded does not make a positive contribution to the world. Instead of going to the work of sending us that information I suggest that you, the customer, call W. & E. Radtke, Inc. 262 253-1412, or HOFFIE NURSERY, Inc. 815 923-2518, or Hortech 616 842-1392, or Lakeland 260 839-4315, or Midwest Groundcovers LLC 847 742-1790 and share with them your innermost thoughts on plant pricing. If you happen to purchase some plants from them during the course of this conversation, that is fine because then they will run out sooner and you will end up buying from us later on in the season when it is easier for us to ship, the whole purpose of these newsletters, selling and shipping plants. And so keep those cards and letters coming.

I recently found out something even worse than customers calling to tell us we were too high priced—they called to tell us that we were underpriced and thus when we were out of a plant they had to pay more to get it in from another supplier and it was our fault. The customer, in this case, made two incorrect assumptions: one that we were sensitive people, and two that we were not smart enough to figure out how to solve that problem in the future, usually about the time it comes to make up next year's price list. Therefore, the customers

will find some variation in plant pricing among suppliers, as well as variation in plant quality, as well as plants changing all during the season. It happens to be against the law for all of us growers to get together to fix prices. The crime is called price fixing and we do not do it.

Speaking of W. & E. Radke from somewhere up near Milwaukee, I note that they grow ferns. Because of the aforementioned sheer personal bias on my part we are dropping fern production here at Twixwood. First of all, this is something that is grown from a bought-in plant or plug and thus we do not have the competitive edge that we would have if we had beds of it in the field or could grow it from cuttings. Besides that it is a difficult plant to grow so that it looks good all summer. I do not know if it is sensitive to fertilizer or to drying out or to what, but the plant seldom looks good for us. We are dealing here at Twixwood with that great law of economics; scarcity of resources. In this case the resources are money, space, time, and skilled grower people. Therefore we will let younger, more optimistic, and harder-working nursery people grow ferns. At our age we are starting to look at our own mortality and then beginning to consider the afterlife and so I want to make my life easier and funner before I start to drool.

To show that we are keeping our ear close to the ground and our finger on the pulse of the market we are slowly drifting into the native plant business. We do not know if there is a rational reason for this latest interest in natives, but we do know that the customer is always right and thus we are starting to propagate lots of *Waldsteinia fragaroides* that some people call *Geum fragaroides* and that has the common name of Appalachian barren strawberry. It looks just like the *Waldsteinia ternata* that we have grown for years which is a pretty nice groundcover except for turning brown and black in the winter and looking ugly for a few weeks early every spring after the snow melts.

Another highly recommended groundcover is *Anemone sylvestris*, Snowdrop anemone, that is highly recommended by North Creek. I thought that because this is a North Creek recommendation and they do their research and all that this was a native plant and, fortunately so, I checked and this is native to Central and Western Europe. As least it is native

somewhere. It grows from seed and we purchased some seed and are patiently awaiting germination. Maybe next year we will have some.

This mentioning of what we are going to have in the future is tricky business. The purpose of talking about future offerings is to indicate to the buying public that we are still alert around here, age and looks to the contrary, that we are taking the nursery business seriously and keeping up with the times making investments in the future. Doing so is not without its downsides. As an example, a few of these newsletters ago I mentioned our recent acquiring of a license to propagate *Bouteloua gracilis* 'Blonde Ambition' PP 22,048, a really nice new plant, and that we were starting to build up field stock. Needless to say we immediately got an inquiry about how many two gallon pots of this we would have in the spring. We got 20,000 splits this winter and they are rooting and greening up nicely but it will be three years before they become two gallon size.

Bouteloua gracilis reminds me that we have offered for years *Bouteloua gracilis* 'Bad River' which is an ecotype, or more precisely a 'natural germplasm' of blue grama grass. It was collected in Haakon County, South Dakota along the Bad River and its claim to improvement is the flower stalk being 7" higher than the regular variety. It is a really good forage grass if anyone is in that business. These little native grasses are being used more and more in roof top green roof plantings and we want to be right at the cutting edge for those things.

After the 'Blonde Ambition' fiasco it is with some trepidation that I mention that we are building up stock in *Allium* 'Windy City' PPAF, and *Allium* "Summer Peek-a-Boo", and *Pennisetum* 'Ginger Love' PP#26,442, and *Pennisetum* 'Piglet' PP#19,074 and no, these will not be available this spring but we are making lots of them. We are licensed for all of the patented plants mentioned here.

One of the stranger trends in the groundcover business is one gallon pots. We have no idea why anyone would want to plant one gallons of these plants unless they had more shovels than hand hoes. All of that aside, gallon groundcovers are the easiest size for us to grow in, so why am I complaining. We have now, or will have by the end of summer, the following in one gallon pots:

One Gallon Groundcovers

30,000	<i>Liriope spicata</i>
22,000	<i>Vinca minor</i> 'Bowles'
20,000	<i>Euonymus colortus</i>
18,000	<i>Pachysandra</i> 'Green Carpet'
14,000	<i>Liriope muscari</i> 'Big Blue'
13,000	<i>Hedera</i> 'Thorndale'
5,000	<i>Vinca minor</i> 'Dart's Blue'
3,000	<i>Asarum canadense</i>
1,000	<i>Vinca m.</i> 'Emily Joy'
1,000	<i>Vinca m.</i> 'Ralph Shugert'
1,000	<i>Waldsteinia ternata</i>
1,000	<i>Aegopodium</i> 'Variegatum'

We can make a lot more of these groundcover gallons pretty fast as we have either large field clumps or some two year old left over pots that we can use to make more gallons. Give us some lead time and we can over-produce almost anything. There are a few provisos here. To begin with the definition of a saleable pot is one where the plant more or less covers the top of the pot and the roots are thick enough to go to the bottom of the pot and hold all of the soil mix together when the plant is pulled out of the pot. This works for everything except *pachysandra*. That plant just plain does not want to grow roots down to the bottom of any pot and we have no idea why; if it is sensitive to being too wet or what. We pot up the *pachysandra* from a handful of two or three year old small pots or plugs which we always have around because we grow in five sizes of small pots which is not a sign of intelligence. This is the kind of plant that we never want to run out of so we over-produce each year and thus have plenty of older, well-rooted and with lots of rhizomes. Those are the white horizontal sub-surface things that regular people would call roots, but that really travel along for a ways and then send a terminal shoot to the surface with a stem and leaves.

Therefore we will ship a really thick gallon of Green Carpet *Pachysandra* with lots of stems and rhizomes and with a good clump of roots, but without the roots going all the way to the bottom of the pot. When we find out why the roots do not grow all the way down we will let you know. In the meantime we will make excuses.

Here are a few things that we have extra and would like to sell. We will discuss later on how a smart person such as myself would end up in this

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situation. We will need much more time than we have during the spring rush to do that subject justice:

	Liners		Flat Price
1,000 flats	Hem. Stella de Oro	32 SVD 2 ½"	\$24.00
2,000 flats	Allium Summer Beauty	18's 3 ½"	\$31.50
Lots	Stachys Hummelo	24 2" plugs	\$19.20

The Stellas were potted a year ago into a heated poly house and grew all summer long. They are pretty thick. The allium was divided three months ago and heated. The pots have 4 or 5 splits in them and are well rooted. Same with the Stachys. All of these should make up fast when dropped into a one gallon pot.

And then we have in the field many rows of daylilies: Purple de Oro, Stella de Oro, Happy Returns, and Liriope spicata and Pennisetum Hameln. Most of these can be dug at any time in the heat of the summer and large clumps potted up into any size pot that you would want. As we are getting older we are getting much more versatile in what we will do to make money. It all starts with having the proper attitude.

Geranium x magnificentum is a new plant to me which did not stop me from over-producing it this winter. We had to dig the stock out of the fields in

order to organize our field plantings and so had a lot of it. In an attempt at honesty and candor I looked this plant up in John Feltwell's book: "Geraniums & Pelargoniums". He says; *Geranium x magnificentum* AGM is a "Showy hybrid, large blue-violet flowers 24" high, mid season, foliage green, whose unusual leaves glow red in the fall." This is available in 3 ½" liners and I hope you buy it before I shift it into gallons and it takes up even more room. I know nothing about this plant except that it has roots on one end and leaves at the other.

A little while ago I asked our outside sales person what kind of information he thought should be conveyed in these newsletters. Being an archetypical sales personage person he said that I should tell all of the customers that we loved them. I cannot quite bring myself to saying that yet. I can say that we appreciate anyone who is out there dealing with the public, whether in the garden center or in the landscape trade. Anyone who deals with the public and then tries to collect money from them is way stronger than I am. Thank you and keep working.

Tom Kruegel



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