

SUCCESS STORY

Oyen Greenhouses

Each Christmas, the holiday season in Calgary, Lethbridge, Edmonton, Saskatoon and Regina is brightened by an explosion of red from Oyen.

For some 30 years, Bill Van Otterloo Jr.'s Oyen Greenhouses have been growing poinsettias; today, the operation supplies some 35,000 of the traditional Christmas plants to the five markets.

Poinsettias are a demanding product requiring considerable attention and experience to perfect. But for Bill Van Otterloo, attention and experience are just two of the qualities passed to him by his grandfather who immigrated to Canada from Holland in the 1950s. A market gardener in Holland, Bill's grandfather employed his skills and knowledge of horticulture in Canada, starting a greenhouse as a hobby.

Bill's dad, an electrician, was drawn to the Oyen area by Alberta's Rural Electrification program; he took over the business, then about 15,000 square feet, in 1960. Twenty years later, Bill succeeded his father. With the help of his father and his long time employee, and now partner, Stuart Hunt has since expanded the operation to 2½ acres.



Looking a lot like Christmas: Bill Van Otterloo amid his poinsettia forest. Red is still the market leader.

That's considerable, considering Alberta greenhouse crops industry is somewhere around 300 acres. That's a viable chunk of property that, despite its small size, is responsible for about \$150 million annually and which employs more than 1,500 full-time and more than 3,000 part-time in 328 operations from Lethbridge to Fort McMurray.

Before continuing the Van Otterloo greenhouse tradition, Bill earned a horticulture diploma from Olds College and became a founding member of the Alberta Greenhouse Growers Association. It's served him well. In 2009, he won the association's Herb Knodel Award for outstanding service and contributions to the industry.

"It's very, very nice to be recognized by peers," says Bill. "The award would not be earned if it were not for the help provided along the way by family, employees, extension agents and other industry members. Even the government was helpful when the price of fuel was high. It is nice to work together to grow the industry."

The award was testimony to Van Otterloo's open-door philosophy of helping other growers and customers. As a third generation greenhouse grower, he has always been willing to share his knowledge with others in the industry.

A possible fourth generation is sprouting: Bill's son Joel has now been working full-time for 2 years after trying his hand part-time for five years.

While profit margins are typically low in the industry, the quality of Oyen Greenhouses' product affords it a reasonable rate of return. Years of experience, a great word-of-mouth reputation and a supportive business atmosphere in Oyen keep Van Otterloo in the green.

"I appreciate a well-grown plant," says Bill.

So, obviously, do customers from Alberta to Manitoba who annually order wholesale finished bedding plants, liners, plugs and Poinsettias, trucked from Oyen daily.

The liner product is a bright spot in the business; Van Otterloo recently finalized a marketing agreement with a national broker and a European cutting supplier who can provide cuttings from farms around the world, allowing Oyen Greenhouses access to up to 90 varieties not otherwise available here, such as geranium cuttings from Kenya.

These new varieties, along with established favourites, are tended by up to 40 employees in the busy spring season. Van Otterloo hires as many as 24 hands from Mexico on a seasonal basis to help overcome a shallow labour pool. He's invested in four residences for his employees.

Poinsettias help provide Oyen Greenhouses with year-round income. Grown from July to mid-December, they make up 15 per cent of the business's annual revenue, second only to the March-June season.

The firm sells its poinsettias mainly wholesale to garden centres, but also to a few chain stores. Being a Christmas tradition, the poinsettia is still preferred in red. But while red once accounted for the majority of the sales, pink, white, marble, burgundy and mixed-colour plants have grabbed more of the market.

Poinsettias are a rather pampered plant compared to Oyen Greenhouses' hardier spring products. Native to Mexico, they were introduced to an admiring northern audience in 1828 by the first American ambassador to Mexico, Joel Roberts Poinsett.

They require more than 12 hours of darkness daily to force the colour changes in the centre leaves, and sunlight the rest of the time to retain the brightness, all in the comfort of room temperature.

The Aztecs produced red dye and a medication from the plant. It is known in Mexico and Guatemala as *noche buena* (Christmas Eve), in Spain as *flor de pascua* (Easter flower) and in Chile and Peru as *crown of the Andes*.