

100 years in family

Uffelmans reap benefits of trend to gardening

by Susan Crossman

While the obvious purpose of Waterloo's Ontario Seed Company is to stimulate growth in people's gardens, what also stands out is the growing success of the company itself, in spite of gloomy economic predictions for the nation's businesses.

Owned and operated by brothers Jim and Buck Uffelman, the business has been a family concern for over 100 years.

The company employs as many as 60 people during the peak of the seed-packaging season. It has four warehouses in Waterloo and owns a farm where seed-testing is carried out.



Ontario Seed Company president Jim Uffelman sorts through seed packets in a supply room

"We've come a long way in the last 25 to 30 years," says seed company president Jim Uffelman.

"A lot of seed companies went out of business, probably because of cost and cash flow problems. Some sold out ... Others went out because it (the seed business) is a seasonal thing, with a fairly short season."

But the Uffelmans have carried on. They have even increased their market, now selling more extensively in Western Canada than ever before. Their market extends from the Maritimes to the West coast of Canada.

"We expect to do a lot more," Uffelman says.

There are a variety of factors behind the success of the Uffelman business.

Probably most important has been the Uffelman way of doing business.

"It's like anything in life," Uffelman said. "You get out what you put into it."

Uffelman also credits the company's employees with contributing to the company's success.

"We've got good employees."

Because the Uffelmans have been in the seed business for a long time, they have the advantage of knowing where to buy the best seed.

"We've been successful because we give a good product for good value," Uffelman said.

He also believes that people are increasingly interested in planting and tending their own gardens.

"Fifteen to 20 years ago there was a slowdown in the seed business because people were making more money and doing without a garden. They would buy their produce."

People then began gardening more because they had more leisure time and they found gardening enjoyable.

Now, Uffelman says, as times get "tougher" more people plant gardens to save money on their food bills.

He says he thinks that gardening's popularity is going to increase even more — which is good news for the Ontario Seed Company.

Eighty per cent of the company's business is from wholesale transactions. It sells on both a retail and a mail order basis.

The company publishes a seed catalogue every year listing the hundreds of vegetable and flower seeds carried by the Ontario Seed Company.

The Uffelmans try to introduce a number of new seed varieties each year, particularly ones that have been awarded the coveted "All America Selections" awards for colour, taste, and excellent quality.

But they still get requests for the old standbys.

"It's hard to drop old varieties because you can't get people to stop asking for them," says Uffelman.

In spite of improvements made in seed development and production, Uffelman says that most seeds have been on the market for many years.

"A lot of the old varieties are stock offerings."

The Ontario Seed Company buys seeds in bulk from around the world — particularly from the United States, Holland and Japan. Few seeds are produced in Canada, although seed was

originally grown in the Waterloo area. The Canadian climate is not kind enough to allow competitive production of seeds.

Most of the Uffelmans' seeds are sold in seed packets. Seed display racks are designed and built, then shipped out to retail stores across the country where most are sold on a consignment basis.

The company buys, tests, packages, and displays its own seeds.

"We do everything from the bottom up," company secretary-treasurer Buck Uffelman said.

The Uffelmans find that distributors and brokerage companies are helpful in selling their seeds.

They do not make wide use of advertising.

"Our advertising is our product," Jim Uffelman said. "Any advertising we do is through our seed catalogue, and our seed displays. We don't go into the city papers. The financing of (such) advertising would be too great a cost."

The Ontario Seed Company visits trade fairs — mainly hardware and landscaping shows outside Ontario. It is also a member of the Canadian Seed Association.

"We can't complain," Uffelman said. "We're doing more all the time."

The Seed Company has never sought government financial aid, although some financial arrangements have been worked out with the Uffelman's bank.

"It's all part of the ballgame. In any type of business you work with the bank," Buck said.

Problems associated with the running of the seed business are minimal, although government bilingual labelling regulations and the change to metric weights did cause some difficulties.

The Uffelmans say they are not necessarily opposed to the labelling of seed packets in both French and English: it is sensible from a business standpoint, since they do business with customers in Quebec. But the bilingualism change was expensive.

The change to metric measurement was also costly. Thirty scales had to be converted; those that could not be changed had to be replaced.

"Everything we buy is in pounds," Uffelman said. "It's meant a lot more work."

The Uffelmans explain that their success in the seed business is due to steady growth.

"You have to walk before you run."



Ontario Seed Company employee Tina Austin uses a machine to "handfill" seed packets