

Under an Acre

From Flowers to Ice Cream

| Barbara Mulhern

>> Published Date: 12/15/2008



have diversification, which in turn creates synergy.”

Pete Bargmann clearly loves kids.

“I grew up around kids. I’m still a kid myself,” says Pete, owner of Alice Acres Farm Market & Greenhouses in Gales Ferry, Connecticut.

Although he doesn’t have his own kids, Pete is a smart enough businessman to know that if you draw kids to your operation, then send them home with a big flower, pumpkin or other item you grow, they are going to tell their parents, who will in turn tell their friends.

And that is, at least in part, how this widely diversified, predominantly retail operation has thrived.

“We’re pretty small for what we do. Seasonally, we probably average three to four employees at a time, all part-time,” Pete says. “It’s all about synergy. You’ve got to

Alice Acres, located in a community of approximately 15,000 people in the southeastern part of Connecticut, was originally a family farm. Pete worked at the farm during high school helping out then-owner Bud Crandall with his chickens, cows and other animals.

“He and my (widowed) mother got married. Then when he died, I came back here to help my mother,” Pete explains. That was in 1995. Pete also decided that year to build a 15- by 10-ft. vegetable stand to sell produce. A friend soon gave him an extra 96- by 25-ft. hoop house he wasn’t using, even though at the time Pete knew nothing about growing plants.

“In 1996, 1997 and 1998 I did a lot of reading, talked to friends and built another hoop house, then a third one. I also built the Bud Crandall Memorial Pavilion which we rent out to different groups for events,” he says.

In 2004, Pete added two more hoop houses and began adding outside growing areas devoted specifically to perennials and mums. “I now grow about 7,000 perennials, all in 5.5-in. square pots, eight per tray. I also grow about 8,000 mums in standard 9-in. pots, 12-in. pots, and in big bushels and half bushels,” he says.

In addition, Pete has a plot of land right next to his greenhouses that is devoted to growing a wide variety of vegetables ranging from tomatoes and cucumbers to eggplant and squash.

“Our property is located in the center of town. We have a big red barn and the pavilion, and it is all well landscaped and mowed,” Pete says. “We are in a strong area economically. We are a stone’s throw away from the river and a lot of tourists come through in the summertime.” Alice Acres’ “average” customer, however, lives 15 to 30 miles away and is middle to upper income.

Frozen sales

Although Pete was happy with how his business was doing, in 2007 he took a major step that he had watched lead a good friend to even more success: He built a large ice cream stand and began having high-quality ice cream delivered twice a week between the third week of April and Halloween. Run as a separate entity called Cows & Cones, Pete says the addition of the ice cream stand has helped make his plant and produce business thrive.

“I should have built the ice cream place sooner—not that I ever thought I’d be the ice cream guy,” Pete says. “It cost \$400,000 to build and is all set up for ice cream. What this has done is bring in a whole different type of people who then tell their friends about our produce and our plants.”

On a typical weekday, he says, he probably gets an average of 200 people coming through just for ice cream at an average sale of \$3 or \$4 apiece. “I catch the overflow for my produce. There is a constant flow of people who all go by the produce and the greenhouses,” he notes.

Kids, of course, “can’t pass up ice cream,” Pete says. Yet, he also has other activities that cater to kids who then go home and tell their parents about his operation.

"In October we do field trips with school classes three days a week. The kids take a hayride and see the animals (including rabbits, chickens, pigs and cows). We charge \$5 a kid. For that they get an apple, a small pumpkin, a hayride and 30 to 45 minutes of taking them around. They play a game, then go back. A couple thousand come through and we get new customers all the time," he says.

Pete estimates he spends about \$15,000 a year on seasonal advertising on the local radio station and in newspapers. Yet word of mouth advertising, he believes, "is the best."

If he had it to do all over again, Pete says he would have borrowed money sooner to build all five greenhouses in 1995 or 1996, then build his vegetable stand followed by the ice cream stand.

For other growers thinking about diversifying their businesses, he says it's important to remember "you've got to be committed to a 24/7 job. You've got to be committed to doing this all the time. Sometimes you get tired or burned out, but I like working every single day."

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