

Local farmer gives spring an early start

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Ledyard - When 5,000 pots of perennials get planted in a greenhouse in Gales Ferry, there must be a change of seasons in the air.

When Peter Bargmann was a 5-year-old visiting his grandmother in Brooklyn, N.Y., he and his father were walking down the street when the young boy saw a man pushing a vegetable cart.

"I told my father that when I grew up I wanted to sell vegetables just like that man," Bargmann says. "My father said I could be anything I wanted to be and if that's what I wanted to do, then I would."

Those words were seemingly prophetic as several decades later Bargmann would become owner of Alice Acres Farm Market & Greenhouses in Gales Ferry, where he sells vegetables and plants.

Bargmann and his staff have been have been busy at work since mid-February, first filling 5,000 5½-inch pots with soil and then planting about 100 different kinds of perennials in them.

Working in a greenhouse, Bargmann and two workers have carried bags of soil to their tables.

The men tear open the bags and un-clump the soil. They fill pots, careful not to over fill or under fill them. The pots are then placed in trays, taken to the far end of the greenhouse and stacked on tables.

The process is tedious but necessary.

"This is the time of year that I get excited," says Bargmann. "It's the Super Bowl for me. I have to be on top of my game. You're dealing with living things and you have to make sure that you take care of them so they can grow and thrive."

About a week later Bargmann receives the "plugs" that he's going to plant. The plugs come in all varieties, from Foxglove to Gaura to Campanula to Coral Bell, just to name a few.

The plugs are inspected. While some of them look dead, Bargmann says what's really important are the roots. If the roots are strong, the plant will thrive.

Dead leaves are removed and then careful fingers poke a hole in the soil and the plug is put in. Next, the plants are tagged so customers will know what they are.

This is done several thousand times over the planting season.

Curt Akin, an employee, said he is looking forward to seeing his handiwork come to life. In the past week, he can already see new growth.

"I'm already excited about seeing how it started off pretty much from nothing, just a bag of soil and a pile of pots," says Akin. "It's really exciting to know I had a good part in this."

During the day, temperatures in the greenhouse reach 80 degrees.

At night, Bargmann sets the temperature at 50 degrees, ensuring that the plants stay warm but won't grow too rapidly.

A hot-air furnace blows warm air. The furnace is connected to an alarm system, which notifies Bargmann if the temperature goes below 40 degrees.

Even with the system, Bargmann goes to the greenhouse twice overnight to ensure that everything is working properly and the greenhouse is warm.

When the annuals arrive later this month, the nighttime temperature will be set at 65 degrees.

He also has to ensure that temperatures don't go above 90 degrees because that will kill the plants.

Fans are attached to the walls to make sure that the flow is fresh and circulating.

Bargmann opened his first greenhouse in 1996, then another in 1999, one in 2002 and two more in 2004. He also opened a pavilion in 1999 and an ice cream shop in 2007.

Bargmann plans to be open for business in the third week of April.

"I was a commercial fisherman in Alaska and I really enjoyed it but this is what I really feel I am meant to do," says Bargmann. "Watching plants come to life, taking care of the animals, interacting with the customers, I enjoy every aspect of it."

