

Rare Plants A Solid Niche Market

by Jenan Jones Benson

SUPPLY, NC - What started as a hobby has developed into two successful horticultural businesses, both specializing in rare plants.

In 1975, Cindy Evans learned to create the macramé hanging plant baskets that were popular at the time. An aunt suggested she market them at craft fairs and Evans arranged air plants in them simply as a visual selling tool.

"People loved them," Evans said, and Sinbad Crafts and Plants was born.

She offers a variety of air plants in assorted containers of all sizes and also makes displays using driftwood. As the business grew, she began marketing Venus fly-traps, as well. The carnivorous plant is native to the southeastern North Carolina region, believed to be the only such area in the United States. For many years, a relative who had grown fly-traps since the 1940s supplied her plants. Upon his death, Evans was left without a quality provider.

About that time, Evans began dating Joe Wood.

"I started [growing] them to help Cindy out and got into a little more than I planned on," Wood said.

Seven years later, Wood's Fly-Trap Farm and Evans's Sinbad Crafts operate side-by-side on a rural property in Brunswick County, NC. In addition to fly-traps, Wood grows other carnivorous plants including sundews, butterworts and pitcher plants. The fly-traps are grown from locally-collected corms.

"People with collector's permits [gather] them for us," said office manager Audrey Sigmon. "They are [easily] found along highways, in the Green Swamp and nature trails." The state Department of Agriculture has placed traps on its list of plants of special concern, meaning that is illegal to harvest them from the wild without a permit and written permission of the landowner. Fly-Trap Farm strictly complies with state guidelines in its collection practices.

Since fly-traps prefer a bog-like environment, Wood recreates that setting in his greenhouses by placing the developing plants on tables filled with water piped from an onsite pond. The corms are started in peat-filled pots and produce saleable plants within four to six weeks, depending upon the time of year.

Fly-trap Farm sells its plants, as well as corms, rhizomes and seeds to a variety of wholesale customers including greenhouses, garden centers and novelty shops. Fly-traps are especially popular as school and camp projects and are always in demand for theatrical productions of "The Little Shop of Horrors." They are shipped throughout the United States in three, four and five inch pots.

"April through early September is our peak time," Sigmon said. "We ship between 150 and 200 cases weekly during those months." Depending upon the plant size, cases hold between 15 and 25 pots.

"Perishability is an issue with shipping," Evans said, adding that the plants can only survive a few days in cartons. That means merchandise going to Alaska and Hawaii must be sent by air. Specialized containers, including liners and lids, were developed to help the plants make the journey safely.

"We have an exclusive three inch round red pot that is our signature," Evans said.

She said that quality and loyalty are the foundations of both businesses. She and Wood refuse to ship inferior plants and operate on a first-ordered, first-shipped basis. "We won't shortchange a small customer if a larger order comes in later," Evans said. "The smaller businesses built us, so we treat them fairly."

Although the fly-traps are easily obtained and grown locally, the air plants used



Cindy Evans's air plants mounted on driftwood are popular items at both trade and retail shows. In the early days, she collected tropical plants in Florida, but most are imported from Guatemala today.

by Sinbad Crafts must be imported. Guatemala is presently the primary source. Evans said trade agreements have facilitated these purchases. The incoming plants are inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture in Miami where they are placed in smokehouses and often fumigated.

Evans and Wood attend six to eight major flower shows annually. They also travel to several souvenir/novelty and nursery shows and exhibit at about 20 retail crafts events.

After 30 years in business, Evans still enjoys her work, both in her greenhouses and on the road, and finds that her products are solid sellers, despite economic ups and downs.

"Traditionally, this business is surprisingly recession proof," she said. "If people can't afford a [major purchase], they'll treat themselves to a \$5 plant."

Contact Fly-Trap Farm and Sinbad Crafts at 910-754-4470 (ph) or www.flytrap-farm.com.



The insects ingested by this pitcher plant included wasps and butterflies.



Grow lights and heaters enable Joe Wood to produce carnivorous plants year round.

Photos by Jenan Jones Benson