

Bonnie Plants: Growing for Nearly a Century

by Hunter Stanford

AS CABIN FEVER reaches its peak around the country, gardeners are desperate for signs of spring. One that has become familiar to many gardeners is the appearance of the vegetable and herb plants sold in biodegradable pots under the distinctive green Tam o'Shanter logo of Bonnie Plants. The company sells more than 300 varieties of vegetables and herbs at 3,900 independent garden retailers and at most major retail chains across the United States.

The company is also the first to sponsor a national vegetable gardening initiative for kids. Through its Third Grade Cabbage Program, Bonnie Plants has delivered over 11 million cabbage plants to schools nationwide.

FROM HUMBLE ORIGINS

The company's founders, Bonnie and Livingston Paulk, were originally from southern Florida. Set back by an unusually hard freeze one year, they relocated to Union Springs, Alabama, where beginning in 1918 they found success growing and selling cabbages over the winter months. With each passing season, the company diversified its offerings and expanded its market. By the start of the 1940s, delivery routes encompassed 10 southern states.

GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

When current president Stan Cope, the grandson of Livingston and Bonnie Paulk, joined Bonnie Plants in 1967, most of the plants were still field grown. As a demand for



Top: Bonnie Plants president Stan Cope, right, examines seedlings with an employee. **Above:** 2013 Alabama Third Grade Cabbage Program winner Jackson Brown with his entry.



potted plants grew, the company began constructing greenhouses around the United States. As of 2012, more than 500 sales representatives deliver to all the lower 48 states and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Growing space at the company's original location in Alabama now occupies 42 acres, and at the peak of the growing season, Bonnie Plants employs about 3,000 employees at its locations nationwide.

Since 1997, the company's plants have been sold in signature biodegradable pots that can be planted directly into the

soil, reducing transplant shock. More important from the company's perspective, they eliminate the waste that stems from use of plastic pots, flats, and trays. Joan Casanova, a spokesperson for Bonnie Plants, estimates the company's use of biodegradable pots has kept millions of pounds of plastic out of landfills.

OF CABBAGES AND KIDS

The Bonnie Plants Third Grade Cabbage Program, which encourages children to grow their own plants, debuted in 1995 and is open to schools in the lower 48 states. Cabbage—specifically the O-S Cross hybrid—

was chosen because it was the plant that got Bonnie started in 1918. This variety produces giant heads that can weigh up to 50 pounds, making the process even more exciting for kids. "We're pleased and proud to provide our youth with this enjoyable and enriching opportunity to engage their interest in the art and joy of gardening," says Cope.

Each year, third-grade teachers can sign their classrooms up for the contest. Once students have nurtured their plants to maturity, each teacher picks a winner based on size and appearance, and submits a photo to Bonnie Plants. Each state's Agriculture Department then chooses a winner randomly from its entries to receive a \$1,000 scholarship from Bonnie Plants.

STILL GROWING GREEN

Always seeking ways to provide better service to customers, Bonnie Plants has recently established trial gardens in Alabama, New Hampshire, and Montana. By testing an array of plants in various climates and conditions, Bonnie is able to tailor the product line it offers to gardeners in different regions. 🌱

Hunter Stanford is an editorial intern with The American Gardener.

For more information about Bonnie Plants and how to enter the Third Grade Cabbage Program, visit www.bonnieplants.com.

AHS MEMBERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Carole Teja

by Hunter Stanford

GARDENING HAS been a way of life for Carole Teja, from her childhood in the English countryside, to becoming an active Master Gardener in her retirement. At



Carole Teja

her home in Atlanta, Georgia, she and her husband enjoy three acres of gardening space where they grow blueberries, pecan trees, and lots of native plants, “despite a good-sized deer population.” She also applies her green thumb to numerous community projects through a variety of gardening organizations.

CONTINUING EDUCATION THROUGH COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Upon retiring from her career in nonprofit education in 2001, Teja decided to get back to her roots and expand her gardening knowledge. She became involved with the Georgia Master Gardeners Association (GMGA), sharing her gardening enthusiasm with fellow Master Gardeners as well as the community through a variety of programs, projects, and other activities.

Teja served as the GMGA president from 2012 to 2013 and is particularly proud of the fact that the organization was able to contribute \$25,000 last year to the University of Georgia for a horticulture scholarship. She now sits on the GMGA board as the vice president of education, a role that will allow her to play a large part in planning the continuing education offerings for the organization’s annual conference coming up in October.

In addition to the GMGA, Teja is also active in the Georgia Native Plant Society (GNPS). She is currently on the planning committee for its 20th anniversary events, and in previous years she served as its volunteer coordinator. She often participates in



Carole Teja, center, enjoys sharing gardening experiences with others, such as this group of Red Hat Society members who toured her personal garden in Atlanta, Georgia.

the organization’s plant rescue digs, during which volunteers rescue native plants—with permission—from property that is scheduled for redevelopment. “The rescued plants go into our gardens or are potted up and made available at the GNPS annual plant sale,” says Teja, who adds that this event “raised over \$40,000 last year and the funds are ploughed back into community projects, grants, and scholarships.”

Over the years, she also found time to participate in the Georgia Perennial Plant Society, as well as other plant-focused organizations and garden clubs. And she joined the American Horticultural Society in 2010 as a way to connect to other gardeners on a national level. In addition to the magazine, the AHS membership benefits she particularly enjoys include the annual members-only seed exchange and the Reciprocal Admissions Program, which grants free entry into gardens nationwide. “I use my AHS membership card to visit the Atlanta Botanical Garden regularly,” Teja says. “It is a very convenient place to meet friends to walk and talk.”

COMMON GROUND

Teja’s experiences with so many different gardening and plant groups have given her a healthy appreciation for how gardening can bring communities together. Teja notes that within her own circle of Master Gardeners, for example, “we have GMGA members who specialize and are active in each plant organization in Georgia, so we encourage each group to share its continuing education and program marketing as it benefits us all.” In return, the GMGA helps promote the “wide diversity of gardening programs” available in the state through its website. Collaborating makes sense, says Teja, because all of these groups ultimately share the same goal: to increase horticultural awareness.

On a personal level, Teja is “enthusiastic to pass along the love of good dirt” to her grandchildren, who all live close by. Based on the fond childhood memories of gardening with her family, she knows that introducing younger generations to gardening can bring a lifetime of rewards. 🌿

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