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## It takes time, patience and a little love to grow more than 50,000 poinsettia plants in Central New York

Published: Sunday, December 09, 2012, 5:56 AM Updated: Sunday, December 09, 2012, 5:56 AM



By **Dick Case, Post-Standard columnist**

Imagine going to work every day with thousands of brilliant red plants smiling at you.

“And, they don’t talk back,” according to the man in charge of the greenhouses at Chuck Hafner’s Farmers Market on Buckley Road, North Syracuse, Mark Tantillo.

He’s talking about the 50,000 to 60,000 poinsettia plants that bloom in the greenhouses during this holiday season. If there are any plants left by the end of buying season, around Christmas Eve, they will be donated to area [nursing](#) homes.



George Roche, of Syracuse, tends to some poinsettia plants at Chuck Hafner’s Farmers Market Thursday.

Justine Fenu/The Post-Standard



Mark Tantillo has worked for Chuck Hafner’s Farmers Market in North Syracuse for 31 years.

A good half of the plants that Mark and his helpers, including Michel Garner, nurtured from inch-long “plugs” in the Hafner greenhouses had been sold when Mark and Michel took me on a tour through the greenhouses – they call them “growing houses” – one morning last week. The huge Hafner complex is unusual in Central New York because they raise their own poinsettias, from tiny stems.

The results are, well, lovely. I won’t go into what Mark had to say about the local stores

that buy their plants in New Jersey.

Mark has worked for the Hafners 31 years. He says he studied [accounting in college](#) but as early as his years at Liverpool High School, he had a green thumb. He toyed with the notion of opening his own plant store but hired on with Chuck while still in school. Mark's dad, Phil, had a hair salon on Route 11 for 30 years before he retired to Florida.

The Hafner farm had but one greenhouse early on. It now has 17, and a large retail store.

I'm guessing that only a few of Chuck's faithful workers start out to raise plants. Mark favors hands-on learning on the job. Michel Garner says she studied [engineering in college](#) before getting [a degree](#) in horticulture from Morrisville College. She enjoys working among a "sea of flowers."

Raising poinsettias – the plant came to us from Central America – is classic hands-on labor for the farmers who do it.

"Baby-sitting," Mark Tantillo explains the job. "We work the greenhouses every day."

The process starts with the thousands of plugs the Hafners buy from Lucas Greenhouses in New Jersey, which specializes in starting plants. The one-inch stems are potted and raised with plenty of water and fertilizer in the first weeks, which begin in July. At one point in the growing cycle, each plant is "pinched" by hand to force it to branch out. This usually happens in August.

Growth regulator may be added to the mix along the way.

There is a four-week period in the fall when some poinsettias must have total darkness in order to turn them the bright red that flames at visitors to the greenhouses. Mark says we prefer red blooms; about two-thirds of the plants that Hafner's sells are that color. It also has varieties that are pink, white, marble and speckled (called "novelty")

The colors depend on the starter plugs. Different colors are raised in separate greenhouse; "red house" "pink house," etc.

Greenhouses are the warm zones of the Hafner complex. The floors are heated to 60-65 [degrees](#) and there is forced air heat, also.

Another bit of TLC involves cutting the stems of poinsettias plants to make the blooms stand out.

Poinsettia flowers are grouped within small yellow structures in the center of each leaf bunch. Mark advises checking out these so-called "cyathia" to see if the plant is healthy. He also advises not growing the plants too close together, to "give them room to breath."

Hafner's supplies a care sheet with each poinsettia sale, which advises the owner about keeping the plant alive through the holiday season. Mark says plants can survive the winter. "I had a woman come in in the spring with a

plant she bought at Christmas," he says.

Onondaga Historical Association held its annual fund-raiser, "Glorious Workplaces," at the market Nov. 17. An essay written for the program said the Hafner family roots were planted in Central New York in 1908 by Christine and Louis Hafner, immigrants from southern Germany. Son George Hafner and grandson, Chuck, are part of that family.

Dennis Connors, OHA curator of history, said in his remarks at the dinner that the venture we see today started from a farm stand along Buckley in the late 1940s, with an eye toward the new business generated by families who worked at Electronics Park and new settlements in the northeast suburbs of Syracuse.

The new greenhouses were built along Buckley Road, beginning in 2008.

Mark Tantillo, who's dressed like an ardent Syracuse University sports fan, says he expects to take a vacation break in Florida right after Christmas. The greenhouses, which were full with plants the night of the "Glorious Workplaces" party, will be "pretty empty" by then.

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