

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 3-19-03) , ©2005

Have you ever lusted through the “Smith and Hawken” catalogue? Gail and David Halsaver of Foxglove Greenhouses in Kingston grow 20,000 meconopsis for Smith and Hawken each year at their nursery. And that’s not all. Their business supplies this world-renowned gardeners’ catalogue with the “Delphinium Collection” and the “Hummingbird Collection” plus many more plants.

David says there are two secrets to successfully grow meconopsis. One is good drainage. Mix 40 percent sharp sand into good health soil. This plant hates wet feet. The second thing is filtered light in the morning or late afternoon. The key is “softer light,” David says.

David tells how he and Gail turned their expertise and passion for plants into a satisfying career. “I had a degree in botany and one thing led to another. I had the science background and Gail had the artistic background and it worked great.” They’ve been in the business for nearly twenty years, starting in Edmonds and moving to North Kitsap in 1989. They started Foxglove in 1994 on Big Valley Road, outgrew the site, and moved to Kingston a few years ago.

One of Gail’s specialties is container plantings. Her designs have been featured in “Sunset” and other gardening publications. Both Halsavers design plantings and grow plants at the nursery for McCormick Woods, Kitsap Golf and Country Club, Meadowmere and Wingpoint on Bainbridge, Trophy Lake and Kiana Lodge. One of their designs was a featured home for Bainbridge in Bloom.

Foxglove is open by appointment only by calling 360-297-0410. But David says walk-ins occur frequently and are welcome. Garden clubs come for lectures on propagation and Gail presents classes on container planting. The nursery also includes a delightful vegetable garden designed and lovingly tended by Gail. Visitors are inspired by the layout and themes of the garden, divided into zones with plants abounding with color, texture and interest.

David shared some of the facets of the business. Foxglove has one computer and phone dedicated only to Smith and Hawken orders. Maria Driscoll happily runs the shipping department. Orders are hand packed, shipped daily and arrive at their new owner’s home in two days. Each year David visits Smith and Hawken’s corporate office in Navato, California to plan out the hot plant picks for the upcoming year.

“Wholesale is bread and butter for us,” David said. “The hardest part is to predict how many plants to grow. We actually ran out of plants last year,” he added. He and Gail enjoy the local customers especially. We devote one greenhouse to local walk-in business. David grows twenty-six varieties of heirloom tomatoes each year. In the fall they grow 7000 mums and 7000 cabbages for autumn planting.

Their site has seven greenhouses with room for more. Each greenhouse contains plants beginning with letters for certain segments of the alphabet. The plants are grouped schematically in each house. Each greenhouse is temperature controlled, some heated and some not. The greenhouses are 20 feet wide by 100 feet long and about eight and a half feet tall. They're full all year long with perennials, annuals, tropicals, some vegetables and all season-plantings. An area outside will be full of plants later in the year. The irrigation system uses water wise and water conserving technology.

Special misters are calibrated to spray water in accordance with a particular seedling's needs. A metal strip mimics the plant leaves and senses how much mist falls and will open and close the system to water the plant with just the right amount of moisture at any given time. A special seeding machine can plant trays with 288 compartments in less than one minute.

One side of one greenhouse was festooned with nothing but coleus in every shade and texture imaginable, with names like 'Inky Fingers,' 'Solar Eclipse' and 'Black Magic.' Varieties ranged from deepest purple and red to brightest green and chartreuse. Leaves were speckled, streaked, and spotted. Plus notched, ruffled and scalloped.

Another greenhouse had a corner devoted to elephant ears Colo Casia 'Black Magic' with leaves as close to black as possible. The plants can reach heights of six feet but can be quite manageable at three feet or less. They're perfect for containers and in or near water features. David says Colo Casia makes a perfect houseplant living happily outside in the summer and coming in before first frost.

I hope you'll have the opportunity to meet David and Gail Halsaver before this gardening season ends. Call the nursery at 360-297-0410 for driving directions and look for the "Foxglove Greenhouses" tag on plants for sale in our local nurseries.