

DIG THIS By Peg Tillery (for 4-16-03) , ©2005

Herman and Elizabeth Vroom of Faylee Greenhouses on Bainbridge Island create giant floriferous baskets of every hue and texture resplendently packed with enticing plants. Customers also flock to Faylee with empty baskets and containers for customized plantings.

Vrooms lived in Zambia where they met their inspiration and mentor Floral Basketry Master Bert Verhoog. His son was in the fourth grade class Elizabeth taught. Both families moved to Herman's native Holland where Vrooms learned firsthand how to grow and create the baskets. Vrooms return to Holland each summer to visit Herman's parents and visit the Verhoogs. During the year Vrooms and Verhoogs exchange ideas, seeds and plant information via the Internet and telephone.

Faylee Greenhouses began in 2001. Vrooms purchased land, a house and room for a greenhouse. Herman found a greenhouse previously used to grow watermelon. He drove to Oregon, disassembled the greenhouse and trucked it home. They had 3000 plants in their kitchen and dining room that January. The greenhouse wasn't even finished. It was a weeklong project culminating in a final frenzy. "Friends and family gathered to help us complete the greenhouse. We had thirteen people spending the night," said Elizabeth. "Everything was happening in the same day. It was amazing. Our secret was we fed them well. Someone was always cooking and watching kids." Herman says, "It was an heroic weekend." Nearly two feet of snow fell the following week. Luckily all the plants (and the greenhouse) survived.

Many of these same friends return each year for an annual work party. Vrooms have a wall in the greenhouse called "The O'Keefe Wall" because the O'Keefes donated the green doors and many of the wall materials.

The secret to the Faylee Greenhouse abundantly planted baskets is the early start received in the greenhouse. Vrooms start hundreds of plants from seed beginning in January and also purchase plugs (tiny plants) filling up the moss-filled baskets as they go. Each basket contains twenty or more plants. Vrooms also grow organic vegetable starts in the greenhouse. Plants and baskets are zoned in the greenhouse according to color, temperature and sun or shade requirements.

The business is completely organic. A "Soil Soup" compost tea brewer is used to inoculate the potting soil and during watering once a week. Beneficial insects control pests. Predatory aphid midges defeat aphids and hypoestus milus control fungus gnat larvae. Elizabeth uses orange flags to mark the plants that need monitoring. They also use insecticidal soap with alcohol.

Opening times for the 2003 Season are Friday, May 2nd and May 9th Weekends from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and by appointment by email vroomhe@yahoo.com or calling 206-842-4489. Hanging Basket workshops are Tuesday April 22 and Sunday April 27 from 2:30

to 5. You may choose from three designs: Traditional Colorful (English style with a contrasting mix of red, yellow, blue and white for a sunny location); Pastel Combination (romantic pastel basket with soft blues and pinks with a fern centerpiece for a shade or partial shade); and Blue and Yellow (blue and yellow basket with clear and contrasting colors for a sunny location).

The class fee of \$75 includes a fourteen-inch wire basket and hanger, moss, special soil mix with time-release fertilizer and fifteen to twenty plants. Class fees include beverages and dessert (homemade by Herman). The Vrooms fed me delicious scones and herbal tea when I visited. (I'm noting a food theme here. I think everyone who visits the Vrooms not only is delighted with them but also is nourished by their cooking and friendship.)

Preplanted Baskets range from eighteen to one hundred dollars. You can bring your own basket or container and Elizabeth will help you design and plant it. Care guides are provided with every planting. Everyone visiting Faylee goes home with the ability to have maximum success and satisfaction.

Faylee gets its name from their two daughters Tessa Fay and Anika Lee. They are now joined by Martin. Elizabeth and Herman haven't decided how to weave his name into the business. When you visit ask to see the photo album. Each year a friend snaps a photo of the children in giant pots. It's a treat to see how the children have grown along with the business. You can also find the family at the Winslow Farmers Market in April and May. You'll be able to find the Greenhouses because you'll see the huge hanging baskets on the power poles at the end of Sportsman Club Road where the road changes to gravel. Faylee Greenhouses is on the right side of the road.