



Smit Nursery Ltd

Abbotsford BC



Rolling with the times

Protesting like a herd of grumpy elephants, the greenhouse reluctantly inches its way along the 400-foot rails on which it is mounted. Gerard Smit drives the tractor laboriously pulling the massive glass structure along. Gerard's younger brother and business partner, Pete, scuttles in and out of the greenhouse, ensuring that both the flowers and the glass house are protected during this brief but crucial journey. Who knew greenhouses could travel?

This movable greenhouse is one of three that the Smit brothers maintain as part of Smit Nursery, Ltd., their cut-flower perennial operation in Abbotsford. Each greenhouse can be moved four times to cover different flowers at different periods of the year. With this unique system, the brothers can force flowers to bloom earlier than usual, or delay flowers so they bloom later than usual. The end result? Each of the Smits' movable greenhouses produces almost double the amount of cut flowers as a stationary greenhouse of similar size.

After bringing the technology back from his native Holland, Gerard and Pete's father, Piet, built the first movable greenhouse on their farm in 1986.

"My dad started the farm here in 1984 with my older brother. It was a daffodil-forcing farm, more or less a hobby farm. I didn't like it at all," comments Gerard. Frustrated that the cut-flower industry was not performing to its fullest extent, and excited by the potential of his dad's business, Gerard sought an answer. In the process, he received a suggestion to go back to Holland to learn more about the trade—and so he did.

"I did that with the intention to go for six months, but ended up staying a year and a half," laughs Gerard. While in Holland, Gerard took courses and worked for other nurseries. He also saw something that sparked his interest. "When I went back to Holland, I saw all these perennials, all these beautiful varieties of new things, and I said, 'This is the answer.' I mean, nobody in BC is doing this, nobody knows about them yet, and I think we have an opportunity here."

When Gerard returned to Canada, he and his dad initiated the changeover from daffodils to perennials. A year before Gerard's father passed away, Pete agreed to come onboard as partner. Gerard reflects, "At that time, I just didn't want to do it by myself. It was just too much to handle."

Since then, things have been rolling along for the Smits. Last year, between their three movable greenhouses, their stationary greenhouse, and their fields, the Smits produced about 1.5 million cut flowers – on just 16.5 acres. And they are still the only ones in North America who grow such a wide range of perennials—including astilbe, phlox, delphinium, veronica, and lysimachia—for use in cut-flower bouquets.

When asked what he enjoys most about farming, Gerard unhesitatingly replies, "Priority one: that I work out of my back door. My wife is here. I have three kids: one goes to school fulltime, one goes part time, and one is two years old. And they come and spend breaks with us. They are around when I'm working. We're bunching, and they come in and say, 'Hey Papa!' They're part of it."

Gerard adds, "You have to wonder why you do things. I think that's one of the things: you do it for your kids. It also has to do in general with life, standard-wise. I'm pushing forty and you kind of think of what life is all about, and you think, 'Am I satisfied with what I'm doing?' And I think I'm more and more coming to terms where I can say I am."

But just as in the beginning, Gerard is excited by his company's potential for growth. "We haven't even scratched the surface in what we are doing. From that perspective, I can see us going a lot further." After further reflection, Gerard adds, "But then I always ask myself, 'How big do you want to get? How big do you want to grow?'"

When asked if he has answered his question yet, Gerard smilingly replies, "No, but I'm not forty yet."

FARM FACTS

Employed –
seasonal: 15
year-round: 4

Gross Farm Sales –
\$550,000

Land Owned –
16.5 acres

Land Leased –
0 acres