



Together, Bruce Huffman, on right, wife Sharee Huffman, not pictured, and son Matt Isenhour, on left, run Bethlehem Greenhouse and Nursery. They remain a major supplier of Christmas poinsettias to area churches despite the damage they incurred during the recent tornado.

Christmas Takes Root in Bethlehem

Entering a greenhouse in midwinter is like taking a step forward into spring, if only even for a moment. The enveloping warmth, the humidity, the bright, diffuse light all transport you to a brief season that is all your own. Immersing yourself in the aromas and vivid colors of a greenhouse during the depths of a cold, gray December is certainly a respite to be thankful for. But this year, the folks at Bethlehem Greenhouse and Nursery have an extra reason to be thankful at Christmastime.

Layne: Are y'all from here originally?

Bruce: Yes, we're all from here. We've owned this business for 18 years. But the business is probably into its 40s now. Originally, it was Propst's Greenhouse and we bought it from them back in December of 1999. We've owned it

People & Culture by Layne Hendrickson



the whole 21st century! (Laughter).

We've added on. We've added a couple of houses to it. Mostly we do greenhouse plants. We do a lot of baskets, and all kinds of bedding plants, vegetables in the spring. And in the fall, we do pansies and mums and that type of thing. And then we have a Christmas crop of poinsettias. Most of our poinsettias we sell to churches, probably 80 percent of them. And some of the local florists walk in. But we probably do 50 to 60 churches in the area.

Layne: How many greenhouses do you have here?

Bruce: We've got seven connected over here on this side, we've got one big one up on top of the hill.

Layne: How did you decide to get into the greenhouse business?

Bruce: Well, I was a teacher, and I was in retail sales for years. But I've always been interested in plants. We gardened heavily when I was growing up. It's always been an interest of mine and I had the opportunity. The Propsts were wanting to get out of the business. In fact, Dale Propst, who owned the place, he helped us for a couple of years after we bought it. His wife

still helps us part time. But it's kind of learn by hard-knocks. We've had a lot of help from the agricultural people.

Layne: What's been the most rewarding part for you so far?

Bruce: I was talking to someone the other day who had been in the business, he said 'It's the hardest job you'll ever love!' It's as hot as can be in the summer, and it's cold in the winter. And it's hard work. Everything you pick up is back-breaking. You walk, you carry. There's nothing easy about any of it! But I can honestly say, I've taught school, and I've been in retail and there were many days that I'd just as soon stayed at home and not went to work, but I don't think I've ever in 18 years not wanted to come down here to the greenhouse and work! Can't beat that!

Layne: What are the challenges for you?

Bruce: The biggest worries we have, we have a monitoring system that tells us the temperature here. The biggest thing, especially with the poinsettia crop or early in the spring where you've got your whole greenhouse full of stuff, you've got to make sure the temperature is right. You've got to make sure you've got power. And hope that tornados don't carry you

off! (Laughter).

Layne: Speaking of which, you've got to tell me a little about that! How did you fare? Because y'all were right smack in the path of the recent tornado here, weren't you?

Bruce: Yeah, it came right across the top of us. We've got two greenhouses that have structural damage we're going to have to start on immediately after Christmas. Start working on them and

them were torn up, but the first two houses right here, everything was laying down. Luckily, we've salvaged probably 75 percent of the poinsettias for this Christmas. Which is amazing really. That tornado could have easily destroyed everything.

But we had four plastic tops we had to put back on greenhouses immediately. And it's not something that you can go and get a roofer

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Sharee Huffman handmakes hundreds of bows for their poinsettias each season.



Signts of Spring are already appearing at Bethlehem Greenhouse. Bruce displays the tiny roots which are just beginning to develop on a tray of rosemary cuttings.

getting them ready for spring. It hit real hard in this corner back here. (Pointing). We had a couple of outhouses get destroyed. Luckily, one of them just missed by about six inches, our transfer switch on our generator, or we would be out of business right now! Because that generator ran for 52 hours constantly after the storm.

My wife and I were out of town and came back early the next morning, but our son was here with his little dog. He had been here filming the actual storm. You could watch the trees swaying, and then all of the sudden he said, 'Well here it comes!' And you could hear it coming like a freight train sound.

Finally, he threw his camera down and dove in there and grabbed a hold of the pole. The doors slammed shut and the lights went out. But just before his last footage, you're looking at the trees, then all of a sudden, it's just a whiteout! You could barely see the first table out here in our parking lot!

You can see the path of it back here in Oliver's Landing. It caught the corner of it and came right up through here. It could have been much worse. We lost 300 or 400 poinsettias probably. And poinsettias are kind of considered a weak plant as far as structure wise. Two thirds of the plants that were hanging up on wires ended up on the ground. That last greenhouse down there, a lot of

to do for you. We had to put it on right then. In the next two days we put them all back on. Matt's son, and daughter, and son-in-law, and one of the fellows that helps us Joel Teague, they all came over here and helped gather everything up and tried to close it off the best we could. Luckily, that first night, it wasn't really, really cold, so even with a few holes we did alright. But they had it pretty well closed up.

We have some interior walls that we could drop luckily. But we couldn't do anything with that last greenhouse, it was wide open, and the end house was too. Still is.

But where the poinsettias are, by the next evening, we were able to have it closed up, because it got down into the 30s that night. But we were very fortunate. But you have to take care of things like that yourself. That's one of the things about this business, you're a plumber, you're an electrician, you're a carpenter. If you can't do all that yourself, you're in the wrong business.

Layne: What are your plans for the future? Anything you'd like to do?

Bruce: I want to slow down a little bit! (Laughter). Naw, just basically what we're doing now.

If you'd like to talk plants with Bruce Huffman, give him a call at 828-495-3468, or better yet, take a little trip and visit with 'Springtime' for a bit at his greenhouse on Icard Ridge Road.