

1-29-2001

Interview with Steve Pletcher

Jenny Lawton

Steve Pletcher

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Recommended Citation

Lawton, Jenny and Pletcher, Steve, "Interview with Steve Pletcher" (2001). *Interviews*. 20.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/elfs_interviews/20

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Accession number: ELFS-JCL-A012901.A

Researcher's name: Jenny Lawton

Event: Interview with Steve Pletcher, owner of Country Colors Greenhouse

Place: at Country Colors, Fredericktown

Jenny Lawton: What season are we in right now? Besides you, most people aren't growing things.

Steve Pletcher: We're in the preparation stages. We're doing all the early things -- hanging baskets and things like that. And we're starting to cut seeds, starting...

JL: So what is the average amateur gardener doing right now?

SP: Looking at seed catalogues -- I think that's probably the main thing they're doing right now. And everybody gets the itch. About middle of February, when the days are longer, that's when people will really start to... Because right now we're adding almost a minute, two minutes a day to every day -- y=know in a month, you'll have a half-hour, 45 minutes more, the sun is going to be stronger. The seed catalogues with beautiful pictures -- everybody's got have it. That's where it is. The frenzy is started.

JL: What's the most popular thing...

SP: For us, probably container plants and things like that -- geraniums, mixed baskets are really popular right now.

JL: What are mixed baskets?

SP: Like we plant these whicker baskets -- we'll line them -- and there will be half a dozen different plants in there -- it will kind of be like a miniature garden. People who don't want to do a lot of weeding, put that on your deck and you've got it made. Interesting colors.

JL: Do you think there are more people who garden like that or who actually create their garden?

SP: It's probably about half and half but people mix it up, though. Y=know people who used to have big gardens, all the way out to the end of the driveway, now they don't. They'll have a spot of color here, spot of color... because everybody is too busy. So they tend to buy certain areas that are close to the house so they can actually enjoy them. So it works out that way.

JL: How much work is it to keep up a garden?

SP: Outside? Depends on the garden. If you do roses... for the high-maintenance sort of things, you're certainly going to have to do more work. If you do some of the things... y=know like perennials where you could stand a little less formal look then...

JL: Do you think people are more attracted to the easier things?

SP: Oh, definitely. Everybody wants the no spray, no weed. We even have people who, they want flowers but they don't want anything that attracts bees. This is the ultimate strangeness to me. AYeah, we don't want bees.@ That's the reason that flowers are. They pollinate it so...

JL: So how many greenhouses do you have here?

SP: We have, I guess, nine.

JL: And is this the biggest one?

SP: Yeah, this is the biggest -- this is about 8,000 square feet.

JL: Do you have a specialty?

SP: For us? Probably is planted baskets. And we try to do a little of everything. We get a lot variety. Like vegetables -- we have 26, 27 different varieties of tomatoes and of peppers. So there is a lot of choice for people there. We grow a lot of specialty annuals and other people that grow...

JL: [banter] I hear Ohio tomatoes are the specialty.

SP: They are - tomatoes are. And everybody has their favorite. And it doesn't matter -- we grow, like I said, 27 different varieties. If we grew a hundred, someone would come in and ask for one that we don't have.

JL: Really.

SP: Yeah, and it's kind of. You know the world is opening up and you'll see like there is a lot of old varieties that are coming out of the Soviet Union -- just things that weren't around before - that were popular over there and are coming here. I'm not sure how great they are.

JL: Is it the seeds that come over or the actual tomato?

SP: Seeds.

JL: Seeds. Ok, I was going to say that they won't taste too good if they come over...

SP: No, just the seeds.

JL: And you're right in the middle of Amish country.

SP: Right. We're right in the middle of nowhere. It's 9 to 10 miles from every little town -- Gambier, Danville, Butler, Fredericktown and Mt. Vernon. Everywhere.

JL: So do you work with the Amish a lot?

SP: Y=know we do some, but as far as them working for us. Most of them are pretty busy on a year-round basis -- and this is fairly seasonal for most of our people. But we're on real good terms with our neighbors and [mumbles] -- but in general, it's kind of a problem; they don't work on Sundays. This business, the Sundays in May, I mean it's something like 10-15% of our business for the year are those 3 or 4 Sundays in May. So we have to work Sundays. That's a big thing.

JL: Do you have your own garden?

SP: We do. In our garden, when we first moved here it was an Amish place, and we had a huge garden. And now it's very small -- it's a raised bed, y=know, small. And it's pretty maintenance free. We do that. And we try grow in less space so we don't have to do a lot of weeding.

JL: So weeding and bees are the two things...

SP: That get people. And it's just some people are on that thing with bees -- it seems kind of funny. We usually recommend plastic flowers to those people.

JL: [banter] So what would someone like me need to start a garden?

SP: For you? Well probably first you decide what you want - what kind of garden. Y=know if you just want a nice little flower garden with maybe some cutting flowers and things like that, which is kind of nice, and then you can get some annuals that can do the job for that. The annuals are nice because they'll bloom from the time you get them until it freezes. They're in bloom all the time. You can have great cut flowers. And people should pick things like [muffled], things that they can cut -- because it's so nice. We do that all summer for ourselves - - we cut them off of our perennial beds. And then of course perennials are the ones that come up every year, and they're kind of neat, you'd want to put a few of those in because it's kind of exciting in spring to see them come back. And then there's nothing wrong, if you don't have a vegetable garden, just put a tomato in a pot or a barrel or stick one in the middle of a flower garden or something like that.

[dog interrupts, banter]

SP: So I guess the first thing you'd do is decide what kind of a garden you want to have and

just... decide whether you want to grow them from seed or whether you want a finished plant. We sell both. And it=s usually good to mix a few things.

JL: They complement each other.

SP: Yes. And also you don=t want to do everything with just seeds - the first year you=ve ever done it -- and they don=t turn out well. And you want to start with easier things -- things that make you feel really accomplished. And we have people start like that a few years ago and they=ll just get a couple of things -- perennials. Now they=ve got a roto-tiller in their back yard. Now they=re telling me new stuff I need to be growing. It gets to be quite a passion for people.

JL: Do you just learn as you go along? Or is there a certain amount of stuff you need to know before you start?

SP: Well, you mean just start your own garden? Yeah, y=know it=s always good -- the seed catalogues have a lot of good information. I think the Home and Garden channel (I=ve never seen it, we don=t have cable out here) but, I think that=s good. And another good thing is to just go to greenhouses and nurseries and just talk to them. Talk to your neighbors, anybody that has a garden is willing to talk about it: AOh, this works well...@ They=ll probably give you some cuttings. Y=know, it=s a pretty social thing too.

JL: It=s social in the fact that everyone can talk about their gardens?

SP: Oh yeah. There=s lots of garden clubs that people can join. And there=s always competitiveness in the spring. Y=know, who=s going to have the first red tomato -- and we sell some tomatoes in big pots. Y=know, we sell small...[muffled] - some of them already have tomatoes on them. Everybody=s trying to beat... and men are probably the worst at that.

JL: Are they really?

SP: Oh construction guys: AOh...@ Another thing we=ve found is that men are usually the big ones with peppers. They like to make hot salsa -- there are a lot of men who do that. Some of it is hotter than it probably should be. They tend to do that.

JL: So how did you get involved in gardening? Were you looking for the hottest pepper?

SP: No. When I was going to OSU, I saw a cactus growing in a barbershop window -- and I went in and the guy gave me some. And I just started growing those. And then I went into (because I didn=t work in a greenhouse), I grew roses commercially for about 15 years. So that=s what I did. Then we started doing this on our own.

JL: What was your plant and how did it grow...literally and...

SP: Yeah the first thing we had -- we built just one greenhouse and just tried a few things the first year -- a little bit of everything. And surprisingly enough people drove out to buy it, so then the next year we put up another house and it=s just kinda been like that.

JL: How long has Country Colors been around?

SP: We=ve been here about 8 years -- and I=ve been doing this for about 22, 23 years.

JL: So do you still like to grow roses?

SP: Oh I=d like to, but you can=t. They=re almost all grown... I grew cut flowers and they=re almost all from South America now.

JL: Oh, wow.

SP: Yeah.

JL: When did that start to change?

SP: Really in the late 70s was the first... and at that time, the Roses Inc. people, which we were members of, we had... there were about 400-and some rose-growers in the United States. Now,

there isn't even an organization, and there's probably less than 50 that grow any amount. The markets switch like that all the time.

JL: Is there any market that Ohio has a handle on?

SP: Actually, Ohio, if you look at things, they are usually about the 4th or 5th biggest horticulture state as far as flowering plants and things. I mean, they're right up there. It's always California, Florida is 1,2, and then it just depends on the crop in particular -- but then you get Michigan and you'll get... Pennsylvania, then usually us. So, 4th or 5th. It's a big deal in Ohio. There's a lot of big places.

JL: Do you ever sell at the farmers' market or do you mainly sell out here?

SP: Yeah, we used to some things like the Gambier Craft Show, and that was good to get people out. Then it starts to be a hassle. And our stuff is perishable products - so it's kind of hard not to damage it. We sell kind of right on the farm here - and it's a little fresher.

JL: It's a beautiful drive to get out here.

SP: It is, but if it snows in the winter, then people don't come out and buy anything. But in the spring it's very nice. [discussion of clients ogling at Amish neighbors]

[family enters and interview stops for introductions and conversation]

JL: Do you think that there is a certain age group...a certain kind of person?

SP: Well, I think it's... yeah, older people will have that tradition of gardening, but I think more and more people really, younger people are getting into it. And even older people. It's always more of a relaxing thing. Y=know, the more high tech everything is, the less time you have, the more you appreciate doing some real dumb work. Y=know you're out here... it's quiet it's whatever it is. So I think that if you look... the rose societies, of you go to Columbus, in the cities you'll always see doctors and professional people will really be into it. And it is because it's such a removal from what they do day to day that it's very relaxing. So I think that's a thing. We see a lot of young people getting into. And a lot people will say... "Oh, my mom used to do that. Or my grandma had sweet peas out front." So then they're going to grow sweet peas. So you come back full-circle and you want to do some of those things that you didn't want to do earlier.

JL: So it's a tradition.

SP: It is. And U.S. has more of a vegetable tradition than flowers -- I don't know if you gone to Canada... you go up to Ontario and it's like, y=know, more like European. And it's very heavily influenced by the English tradition of gardens and roses and more formal and cottage gardens. Whereas here it was always more... don't go that way.

[interruption from outside]

SP: Y=know here it was always more of a vegetable thing - and sidelined with the others. But that's changed -- I think more ornamentals.

JL: It seems obvious the difference between a farm and a garden -- but when you're growing your own vegetables, what's the difference?

SP: Well, there isn't. It isn't. And it is true -- I think that gets into, when you get older, things growing around you. The best tomato you ever had you had was at your grandparents' farm -- and the sweet corn is so much better than it is now... In truth, a lot of the varieties you can grow in your garden are better than what is commercially available. And the main reason is, they don't have to be packaged, they don't have to be uniform, and the time they are harvested...

y=know because everything is for economics. Everything has to be ready in 7 days, because we only want to go through and pick once or twice. And we want to be able to... it has to be able to hold up. So usually it will have a little thicker husk or skin or something to protect it. And maybe not nearly the sugar content because it=s picked early so it can withstand the shipping. So there are a lot of benefits to homegrown stuff.

[banter]

SP: It=s so nice. It could be zero out today and if it was sunny, it would still be 70 degrees in here. It=s nice. And it=s pretty peaceful. I like it.

JL: Is that what drew you to growing things in the first place?

SP: Yeah, I think it is -- I like it. And it is -- to see things grow every year... and it=s challenging because every year is different -- because the weather is always different - there=s always kind of different scheduling because of the weather. And there=s new crops -- this year is the high gas bill. Always something.

JL: How is this year shaping up, besides the high gas bill?

SP: Oh this year? I think the crops look real good. Right now, we only have 3 houses filled -- but then we=ll start to fill one a week here just about next week.

JL: Wow.

SP: The crew, right now we only have about 4 people - and they=re only working part-time. And by the end of March we=ll have between 18-22 people and they=ll be pretty much full-time. So there for about 8 weeks, it=s pretty crazy.

[permission to visit again -- end of interview]