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Interview with Fred Forster

Jenny Lawton

Fred Forster

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Researcher's name: Jenny Lawton
Event: Interview with Fred Forster
Place: at Glass Gardens Greenhouse, Mount Vernon

JL: So how long have you had this greenhouse?

FF: Since >88.

JL: Since >88? So what did you do before then?

FF: I was a discount chain merchandise manager for a chain of stores **B** also, for 20-some years, the manager of different discount stores. Yeah, I know the discounters really well **B** that=s why I decided to take them on. They=re nothing to beat. They=re easy to beat. Everybody gets worried about them but they=re nothing. They=re like, I always say that a discounter is like the red coats, y=know, during the Revolutionary War. They had to walk down the center of the road, y=know, so the minute men could shoot them from the trees. So I consider an independent like a minute man **B** he can shoot at the discounters. Because I was a discounter - I was a discounter for 25 years. And I ran a chain of discount stores so **B** as I say, that=s why I took them on.

JL: So but this is quite a different industry, quite a different...

FF: Well, y=know, I bought a lot of different, I bought all different departments **B** I was a buyer too.

JL: Oh, OK.

FF: And I chose this one because the discounter has no knowledge of this one, so they=re easier to beat.

JL: Aha.

FF: As far as, y=know, taking it over and doing it, I didn=t have any experience, but y=know everything=s in a book.

JL: Yeah?

FF: I mean, that=s what you do, you learn from a book, right? So, it isn=t brain surgery, by any...any stretch of the imagination. So we just took it over. Y=know, a lot of people worry diseases and they worry about insects and this and that but there=s really only a couple of things to know and my son does all the spraying and... it really isn=t as difficult as it seems. That=s why so many people can do it **B** that=s why they enjoy doing it.

JL: Right.

FF: If it was hard, y=know like building kitchen cupboards or something, there wouldn=t be as many people trying it.

JL: Right. So you basically got into gardening after...

FF: Well... the story of it is, I was running, **A???** had a discount store here and I ran it for 14 years - for 11 years. My brother and the gentleman that owned this greenhouse to begin with **B** he built in 1956, this is like the 45th-year anniversary of it, in fact **B** he died in 1982, he was 80-some years old, Ed Miller. And so I was going to buy the greenhouse at that time **B** and me and my brother were going to run it. So I was running the **A???** store, and I went to Jim Conn-**A???**, who owned the chain, said I was going to quit. And he said, **A**Well, what if I buy the greenhouse, hire your brother, and you stay working for me. So, we figured we didn=t know anything about greenhouses, so it sounded like a good idea **B** then we could get trained, right?

JL: Yeah.

FF: So he did that and five years later... well, then I went up to their home office to run their stores and such and five years later, I just got tired of driving from here to north Canton everyday. So I decided to come on back and do the greenhouse. So he says he didn't have anybody that was interested in the greenhouse, so when I was leaving, he gave us a deal and said we could buy the greenhouse from him. And it worked out fine. We did it on nothing, basically. We had... we did it on a home equity loan. We bought the greenhouse, or leased the greenhouse for a couple of years, and we bought it. And we started with a 30,000 dollar home equity loan, and that's what we started a business that does a million-two now.

JL: Oh my gosh.

FF: Without any money, when we did it. It works out alright. But I knew a lot of people to buy from that trusted me from being in the dis... so I could buy as good as the discounters could buy, because I was a discounter. And, I mean, so we generally built it from that point. It's just one of those things that just happened **B** y=know, just went out and happened. No great shakes.

JL: No great shakes. And you learned all you needed to know from being trained?

FF: Well, basically, from doing it. Y=know most things, it's like anything you do, you learn from doing it. You can read a book, but the book might give you an idea of what to do, but until you do it, it doesn't do you a whole lot of good. Y=know, hands on is what you learn. You learn how to grow a geranium **B** and the book tells you this way, but after a couple years, you see that y=know **A** if I do this, it's a little better, and if I do that, it's a little better, **@** and you catch on, y=know, just from your own knowledge of, **A** gee, a particular temperature is better, a particular moisture, doing it one way, doing it another. **@** Y=know, you pick all that up. Basically, as I say, it's experience. But, the generality, so you don't go bankrupt when you start, is in the book **B** and if you follow the books, y=know, you're gonna get about 80% of it.

JL: 80% of it...

FF: Right, right. So, y=know, it's really not a hard thing to do.

JL: So you're always learning, then.

FF: Right, yeah **B** what we do here is that we change constantly. We grow different things. In other words, if we can buy something, and it's good enough, good enough quality, we don't bother growing it. We'd rather find something, then, that we can't buy, and then grown it. Y=know, that will give us more money per square foot. Like we do 60 or 70 varieties of hastas. Well, we can't buy 60 or 70 varieties, but if we buy the roots from the people we can do that. Y=know, we try to expand our selections. Now, perennials, we can buy 500 different varieties **B** and the perennial people are good **B** so why grow perennials? Because you buy 30 of this one and that... we, in perennials we grow a thing called **A???** **@** plots **B** but we do 800 flats of it **B** it's an item that sells a lot.

JL: Wow.

FF: Y=know, and at 20 dollars a flat, y=know, 800 times 20 is about 16,000 dollars worth **B** it's worth us growing it. If you understand... but where you've got a perennial and it's an off-the-road thing that you're only going to buy 20 or 30 of them in a year, might as well let somebody else grow it. Y=know, so, we change constantly in our mixes because of that. We grow most all of our bedding flats, just because we've been doing it. We grow zonal geraniums rather than seed geraniums, because I like the zonal **B** I think the seed is like petunia, it's not worth much. And, uh, a zonal geranium is a big bush -- it gives you a bush. In California, they grow five foot high **B** where a little seed geranium is like a petunia, it's a little flower and, I mean, it's pretty.

But there's no comparison. And we sell about 30,000 geraniums here a year. But the people that buy our zonals and then buy a K-mart seed geranium see the big difference. So they come back and buy our zonals again. And so, all through the years, we've built our business up by doing that. But we can grow a better quality just because we can, y=know, select the, the selection of it, the varieties of it, and do what we want. We're not panned in like, Garden Center, like a garden center normally is, that buys from somebody. Or a discounter; they have to take whatever that person grows. So they really can't do what we can do in selection. And basically, I believe in three things, and that's Service, Selection and Satisfaction. If you can take care of those three items, you've got your customer. And we've had five record years in a row, with sales even with the new discount. Y=know, >95 and >96 there was new K-mart, a new Walmart, a new Quality Farm & Fleet **B** and we've had five record years of sales. But the discounter, because I was a discounter, they operate (if you know anything about discounters, you probably don't) they operate on a point of sale register. You ever go through the register and they scan things?

JL: Right.

FF: And that's to keep their inventory, right?

JL: Right.

FF: And they live by that point-sale register. So that's how you kill them; you kill them by what they live by. Because, well, like Walmart, the first year they opened, they brought in a thousand roses. Now they didn't bother to unwrap them and they put them pot to pot so they got a disease. And then they finally unwrapped them but they still had a disease because they kept them pot to pot **B** they weren't smart enough to leave the air run through. So they bought a thousand the first year **B** they probably only sold 200 of them, at regular price. And probably only sold 200 and mark-down price **B** and probably threw away 600. Well their point of sale register told them that they sold 200 at regular price **B** so the next year, their point of sale register says they get 200 roses. And so all you have to do is match them the first year, match them the second year, and by about the fourth or fifth year, they're no longer competition because the point of sale register told them to keep buying less, less, less. So they're no longer...

JL: That's very interesting.

FF: So no longer a competition. So you're using their way of operating to beat... believe me, when it comes to discount, that's who I go against. I go against the people I worked for 30 years. Y=know, that's how I use **B** that's how I got started. But it worked the same... like a trim-a-tree. We do 100,000 dollars in trim-a-tree, now here. Y=know the hard goods, y=know like the lights and stuff. Nobody else in town matches us, but we meet the discounter. Every year they sell less, so every year they buy less **B** and eventually we have the business and they don't because their registers told them, their point of sale registers told them, that that store did not sell this merchandise, so you don't buy it from them next year.

JL: That's very interesting. [asks if he is willing to be contacted by other researcher who is working specifically on economic aspects of foodways... FF agrees]

FF: Well, yeah, it's small business against the discounter. Y=know, but everyone is scared of a big store. And everybody thinks a big store can do the best. But the logic of that is that big chain like a Walmart or a K-mart or any, they can only carry so many SKU's in their warehouses, because their warehouses are only so big. And so they can't carry the selection. Now, they'll build a nice big end-cap of something and they might have 144 pieces, and it might

be at a good price. But I can buy 12 pieces of 12 items and give you a selection, and still match their price on the cheapest item. Because you see, they have a head of operations **B** they have a vice president **B** they have a security department. I don't have any of that. So as long as I can buy within percentage points. And basically they can buy about 5% better than me, but I can make it up in a lot of other ways to be competitive to them. We do the most business in town on bagged goods.

JL: Bagged goods?

FF: Y=know, like top soils and such that you use in the garden. And the reason we do that is #1 our price is good compared to the discount, we're better. The second reason is that we load everything for everybody. So you have to go in the discount store and try to get their automotive guy **B** >cause I ran them for years, I know **B** to come out and load your car **B** but it isn't going to work. You're not going to get it, so...

JL: Right.

FF: And so we do. And it's easier for me to get a price than them sometimes because I'm small enough **B** they know I'm going to buy 50 loads of something, they know, they offer K-mart a price, they're going to sell 5,000 loads. So believe me, they can sell me my 50 loads cheaper than they can sell K-mart their 5,000 loads because that's a lot of loads. But I'm just a little guy **B** if you can catch me, I'm worth a few cents, right? A few dollars. So we can do things... Now if you understand discounters, then you can understand how to beat a discounter. A discounter is the easiest thing in the world to beat. The only thing a discounter does right is advertise. And you see all their ads and see them and you run in.

JL: Uh-huh.

FF: And after you go into the store, there's no help, there's no service, and it's tough to get to a register. A lot of times, even if they do everything else right they don't pay five dollars for a cashier to check you out **B** y=know they've got a staff of 14 deep. So, the only thing they do right is advertise. And we advertise more than any other person in this town in lawn and garden. We spend 60,000 dollars a year in advertising.

JL: Oh my.

FF: Y=know, so, we do more than anyone... in other words, we beat the discounter at the only thing that the discounter is good at and that's how... that's why we do a-million-two. When we took over this business, it did 100,000 dollars **B** now it does a-million-two. So, you had to take it somebody **B** and who we took it from was the discounter. That didn't help your gardening but...

JL: No, that's very interesting **B** that's very helpful. Well let's talk more about gardening. Now a lot people come in here for flowers but how about vegetables.

FF: Yeah we do, we grow about 20,000 flats total and of that we do about 4,000 flats of vegetables -- so 20% of our bedding plants are vegetables. And of that 4,000 flats, about 1,000 of that is tomatoes.

JL: Really?

FF: That's the #1 item. Every...have you ever heard, I don't know, your father or anybody -- y=know they've gotta grow the first tomato or the biggest tomato, they've gotta have a tomato plant. Even if they don't grow anything else, they put a tomato plant...

JL: Uh-huh.

FF: Y=know, that's why it's the #1 vegetable. Because everyone wants to have the first tomato

or the biggest tomato, they grow tomatoes.

JL: Why=s that?

FF: Well, to tell you the truth, everyone uses tomatoes for one. But I think it=s just the idea that it=s something that they can grow and it=s done basically by men, not women. Women buy more flowers. But men will buy more vegetables. So it=s a little different. Now I can=t say that no women garden, they do garden, of course.

JL: Sure.

FF: But, y=know, in percentages, probably in flowers 80% of our sales are to women, where in 80% of our sales are to men. So it does change.

JL: That=s very interesting. I would think that the stereotypical gardener would be a woman.

FF: No, not necessarily. Men, they take pride in their yards, they do certain things. Where women... I would say that there are more men that grow roses than there are women -- even if you=d think that there are more women. There are some things that men bend toward. I would say that our total customer traffic here probably is 60% women, 40% men. It=s a very high degree... men will get more into fruit trees. They=re more into the food grow. I used to, in fact, when I was in the discount store, I used to say that if you didn=t eat it, I didn=t know anything about it. I didn=t care to know anything about it... I think that=s probably a trend. The women generally do the flower gardening -- that is basically where there=s no denying it. But when it comes to shrubbery and fruit trees and that, that=s into the men=s area rather than the women's.

JL: Now are they growing those things to eat?

FF: Yeah, y=know there are gardeners that I don=t know if it=s really worth it to do sometimes - they spend so much to, they like to grow their own product. What I tell, you probably don=t know this because you haven=t grown but -- if you grow potatoes... and you get them at the store they don=t have nearly the taste as if you grow them yourself because of the nutrients in the soil.

If you grow an item, like a valdelia onion, it=s a sweet onion -- but when it=s grown in Valdelia, Georgia it=s sweet -- but when it=s grown up here it doesn=t nowhere near the same because of the different soils. But a lot of people like, a lot of women, when the families were larger (see, the families are getting smaller all the time) would do a lot of canning -- the peas and the beans, and you=ve heard of all of that. And that=s sort of dying off -- in other words, vegetable gardening has been on the down-trend, I would say, in the last few years, y=know just because the families are just not as large. They had to go and can 50 quarts of beans every year so they=d have a quart every week instead of buying the can. And now everybody is working, where the woman was at home, so there=s a lot less canning going on, a lot less of that. So I would say that we have held up in the vegetable sales very well. But if you go into the discounter, you can=t hardly find a vegetable plant y=know because there=s not that much sales as far as they=re concerned. And we carry 20-30 different varieties of tomatoes. So where they might have one or two... we=ve held up our business because y=know we=re about the only place where you can buy a rhubarb or an asparagus root, or strawberry plants or grapes in this town. We manage to hold up that part of our business rather well but that=s because everybody else is really out of that business. They don=t...they want something that will come in quick and that they can sell a lot of. They=re not interested in 12 grape plants.

JL: Right.

FF: We survive on selection. And I would say, now everybody might say that it=s a woman=s thing, but it=s probably more men when you=re talking vegetable gardening and fruits and such.

It's more into the men than the women.

JL: That's very interesting -- something that I didn't know. Now, what's the difference then between farming and growing vegetables?

FF: Well farming is done on a big scale -- I used to farm 50 acres of corn, or 100 acres of corn -- the difference for me is that a farmer grows, let's say, 1,000 acres of wheat. His price is controlled by the commodity market. My price is dictated by what I put on it that the consumer will buy. So I'm not restricted like he is. It could be that Canada decides to sell wheat for a dollar a bushel and it costs him two dollars to grow it -- and all you can get for dollar... there's a big difference between horticulture (what we do) and farming, what they do, as far as product to eat. And also people who grow wheat and soy beans in this county - you're not getting anything that's made in here from the things that are grown here, do you understand? It's all shipped out and processed -- there's middle men and everything else. This is agriculture. I always said that a farm is the greatest place to live, lousiest place to make a living -- because you really don't have control over your own destiny. I have a lot of customers, so I have a better chance. A farmer can only probably sell to one or two food mills in the area. It's like a whole-saler -- I'm not a whole-saler that sells that sells product. Because if I'm a whole-saler, K-mart or Walmart can say, **A**we don't want you to take a price increase this year. **I** I've got a friend of mine in Crestline, and he sells about 80% of his crop to K-mart. Well, the price of natural gas went up, you remember the hike, went up 3 or 4 times last year. And so, the industry that they've got to put out at least a 10% surcharge for everything in order to survive. And that when it was only double -- so who knows what it's going to be like by the time we get to May. But K-mart says, **A**I refuse to take an increase. **I** Well now if the gas bill was, last year, \$4,000 and this year is \$16,000 for this month, guess what, he needs an increase. And if he doesn't get it -- and the same way with a farmer. The natural gas is 78% the cost of nitrogen fertilizer. And so they closed down fertilizer plants in November because the price of natural gas got so high. Now they've re-opened and it's higher than it was in November and there's also gonna be a shortage. Now the farmer can't say, **A**I need \$4 a bushel for my corn because now I'm paying three times more for my fertilizer. **I** So that's the biggest difference from an economical point of view. Plus, when you're talking farmer - if you're talking small farmer where a guy is putting in a small garden and he's got a few pigs for himself and he's got a few... sure he's living somewhat off of that agriculture. But not as far as selling to Knox County. Sure, an orchard might, or something like that -- there's a few things that might sell some agriculture products. But farming in itself really doesn't directly relate to our economy in any... sure they sell the products and so you can say that there is \$4 billion worth of agriculture products sold in Knox County. Now, that's true, but it has nothing to do with the food you or Knox Countians eat.

JL: So the food they do eat, this is a much more personal business and personal exchange.

FF: Right, yeah. That's what it boils down to. Plus, y=know, I've got the person who's going to buy 6 tomato plants, 4 potatoes, 4 peppers, and they're going to put in their garden. They're going buy the bean seed and grow it... what I sell to people, people consume in Knox County, let's put it that way. So it's a little different than big agriculture. And I'm not knocking big agriculture -- I am agriculture. I feel sorry for the farmers. I'm not knocking them. They just don't have a way to control their own destiny. So right now, it's tough. But the whole-salers in our industry are caught in the same thing - they don't have a way to control their own destiny. I

have more of a way because if I don't sell as many say, sell I grow 1,000 flats of tomatoes this year and I only sell 900 -- next year I do 900 flats and I find something else to grow. I have more control over my destiny than they do -- where a poor farmer, they grew 1,000 acres of wheat this year, and all he sells are wheat, soy beans and corn, he might be able to switch it around a little, change the quantities, but he still is caught in soy beans, wheat and corn.

JL: Well, this is definitely a better deal, especially...

FF: Well, yeah, this is a lot -- let's just say, we're only 8 acres -- we only have 1 acre of greenhouse. But I can do more volume than most any farmer in this county, by farm. There are very few farmers that do a million dollars worth of volume in this county. So it's a better business -- it's a more personal business. The customers you have are customers that basically stay with you. You know, we're seeing a lot more younger and younger people going in to gardening than we saw 10 years ago.

JL: Why do you think that is?

FF: I think that some of it is economics -- basically -- and it's not that they have to grow this stuff because they're poor. It's that they buy their own home -- and all of a sudden you're home... and when the economy gets bad, like they're talking recession - y=know, you can normally take \$10,000 and go on a vacation to Hawaii for 2, 3 weeks, right? Well now you don't have the \$10,000 so you're sitting at home, and you've got \$1,000, \$2,000 -- and you're sitting there and you think, Agee, this doesn't look very good and I've gotta be here everyday, @ and it's sort of a recession-proof type of industry. But we're seeing younger people are moving into it too. Because if all of a sudden you own a house and your neighbor has got beautiful flowers, landscaping, nice garden -- and you're sitting there in the metal with an empty lot, guess what you're going to do. You're going to try to look like your neighbor. And the other reason, I think, is that the discounters are getting weaker, even though the... 5 years ago, the magazines were always telling how it was going to be the end of the independent garden center - - that the discounters were going to take everything over, and that we were going to go by the wayside. What happened is that the discounter went by the wayside because they couldn't handle... because they're not geared for... the discounter, probably about 2% of his total sales is gardening stuff. So do you think he really cares? It's a six-week ad item for him, is what it is. By Memorial Day, they're done. So, yes, they have some decent prices -- I don't qualm them -- but they aren't really into showing the person how to grow. I think the new people are coming in - I think the other thing that's entering in is Martha Stewart, Home and Garden TV, y=know people sit and watch that and they get interested in it -- and that brings the younger crowd in to us to do these certain things.

JL: And so that's how you learn about gardening? You watch Home and Garden?

FF: Well, I think that's how the people get interested in it -- Home and Garden TV and Martha Stewart (I don't necessarily agree with her, but she's a good business person! I won't qualm that!) But it creates interest. And as I say, if all of your neighbors are doing, it creates interest. So all we've got to do is create an interest and then it comes to more and more people doing it. They come out with a new, fancy tomato, then everybody wants the new fancy tomato. It's a little different -- what just came out, oh, the grape tomatoes, which you buy in the store and they're on those little grape things. This year we're going to have grape tomatoes, first year we've had them. But we've had a lot of requests for grape tomatoes. Every so often, there's something that comes out. You've heard of those peace lilies with fighting fish in the bottom --

the roots of the peace lily grow into the pot and give the fish the oxygen and the fish gives the fertilizer back to the plant. But that comes from some kind of something on TV. I think what's happening is that and just bringing in a younger grow. There was always a gardening show somewhere on the radio for years and years -- but now it's turning into a big buck business. The knowledge is bringing in the next generation, if you want to call it that.

JL: Would you say that there becomes a community of gardeners who share information?

FF: Well, what I think is that a place like ours, which gives selection of everything, we push gardening, we advertise 3 times a week year-round -- we create, it's like a disease -- if I can send you home and you can grow one plant, the next thing you're going to do is try to grow 3 plants -- and you create disease. If you have the location, you're in the area, that can supply the product that you're hearing about, then your neighbor starts doing it, you start doing it and it just spreads. We do business here, in retail, than garden centers do in Columbus. Now the reason is that Columbus is a city -- but the other reason is that we have more per capita, or more people in here who have the availability, plus with the interest to plant. Because, most of the Plantlands and such in Columbus don't do over a million dollars in Columbus so... Frank's and stuff like that. But we do. 45% of our traffic comes from out of Mt. Vernon. So it comes from the outlying areas -- but that's who plants -- because they have the bigger yards and the gardens and Apple Valley creates a lot of that -- they're constantly building there. It creates the business. Like I say, it's like a disease -- a lot of people start working here - they buy a plant, and then another plant -- and before they know it, they end up spending their whole paychecks working here, because they get carried away with it. They've to have every perennial they can get of a type -- the same thing happens to our customers. It's amazing -- probably about half of our customers we'll see twice a week. And before I ever bought this place, I was only ever in a greenhouse twice in my life. It's a different atmosphere.

JL: So it's a gardening bug.

FF: Yeah, that's what I call it -- and it spreads. And it does, as I say, you can see it yourself. Like with clothes, it's a fad. Well, ours is a fad too, in reality -- because if your neighbor looks good with that many plants, you'll want to do it. I've got a son who lives in Apple Valley, and his whole yard -- it was a yard and he tiered it. He has shrubbery and plants and... there isn't hardly any grass left. It's great but you spend thousands and thousands of dollars doing it. Now, it's impressive, but who would want to maintain it? It's a lot of work. But it creates a disease - so the other neighbor has to do it. And that's what it is... but it's the same as all human nature -- it's in everything. Like a hairstyle -- pretty soon three-quarters of the people are wearing their hair the same way. Same difference.

JL: That's funny. Do you have a garden?

FF: Not anymore -- I just don't have the time. We start with now... by the time we hit the 12th of March, we have 50 people working in here. By the time that's over, it's July 1st, and we're growing other things -- mums, poinsettias. I don't do much gardening -- my wife does a basic garden. I used to garden a lot before I got into the business -- I used to plant big gardens, 5,000 strawberries one year. I've done different things -- a half-acre of potatoes. Y=know, so I've done all the gardening, but I really don't care to plant much at home. It's like the plumber no fixing a leak...

JL: Exactly, that makes sense...

FF: We have knowledge of it -- I did a lot of gardening when I was working discount...

[SIDE B]

JL: Tell me more about why -- about the relaxation factor, why you went into gardening on the weekends.

FF: Well, basically, if you're working, in a discount store you're working 12 hours a day and you're working under a lot of pressure. If you're a manager in a large discount store, there's a lot of pressure. We have 37 supervisors running in a week and they all want their front end-caps.

Y=know, when you get a chance to, let's say, not talk to people, you don't have to talk to plants, you get to doing things like that. And that's what I think a lot of people look for.

Y=know it's proven that it's a good relaxing point for people -- it lowers their blood pressure and there's a lot of benefits to gardening. Satisfaction, watching something grow that you planted -- it's a relaxation in its own way, and it's accomplishment. Y=know, I think it's hard for a lot of people anymore to see any accomplishment in their life. Maybe they can say that they made more dollars, but it's really it's an accomplishment that they can get through their own garden. To grow their own beans, or to grow the biggest tomato, or to prove that they can do this or do that. It's something that they can do -- and it's relatively quick. I mean you plant it and within two months and it's there. It's like planting a pound of potatoes and coming up with 10 pounds in three months. And then you say, **A**Oh, I really did a good job!**@** You really don't have to learn a lot. Basically if you plant it and water it, in most cases you're going to get something. Sure, if you fertilize it and you build up your soil better, sure you can get more. But everybody can get something if they care for it. Most people's biggest problem is weeding, but even if they don't weed, there's something hiding in the weeds when it gets ripe that they can find, that they get out of it. So there is a great satisfaction, relaxation.

JL: And so what made you decide to grow potatoes and strawberries? Do you prefer those foods?

FF: It was something that was there to do -- I only did it once, I wasn't dumb enough to do it twice. I didn't mind planting them, I mind like taking care of them, but I hated picking them. And one time, on a Sunday, when they were getting ripe and we started picking strawberries, we lived on Rt. 3 and we had people lining up, 20-30 cars wanting 10 quarts, 20 quarts, and there were only 3 or 4 of us picking. And after a day of doing that I decided that I wasn't doing that anymore. Having people standing and waiting, **A**Well aren't you done yet? You haven't got my 20 quarts ready?**!@** [laughs] Yeah, there are people who pick-your-own, but I just did it one year. I guess a lot of people do things just to prove that they can do it.

JL: Not necessarily to make money off of it.

FF: Right, not to make money. I don't think that gardening, when you're talking Knox County, it's a product that people are making money on. It's more of a product that they're doing for relaxation or enjoyment. That's really where the gardening is. It's not in profit. Sure, I make profit, I don't deny that.

JL: But it's your business.

FF: Right, but 50,000 people around here... 49,500 of them garden for enjoyment, not for profit. They get some of their own food, and they feel that it's healthier because they don't spray and they don't do this or that -- but it is, it's for enjoyment and relaxation.

JL: So tell me, you have some customers that you see twice a week -- do you have any

interesting customers, particularly garden nuts?

FF: There are some people who dress up with the knee-pads and the gloves and hats -- they get into the... but they enjoy it and they belong to the garden clubs -- there=s a lot of garden clubs in Knox County where the women get together. Basically most garden clubs are women, but there are some men in them.

JL: Are garden clubs most flowers?

FF: Mostly flowers -- they do vegetables, of course, but they=re mostly into flowers.

JL: So there=s a whole persona -- with the outfit...

FF: Most people don=t get into that extreme -- but sometimes you run into... I remember one lady told me one day... [tells an anecdote of a women who made a garden faux pas due to her ignorance of peed pellet] It=s our job, if you=ve got questions and you don=t know how to do it, we=ll tell you how to do it. Because if you can do it, you=ll buy more. We=ve got probably the biggest chemical selection in the area of fertilizers, because we know what they are. Most people don=t have any idea what a fungicide and a miticide and a particular insecticide for a plant are, where we do know what to do there. So if people bring in their leafs and say **A**here is my leaf, what=s wrong with my plant?@ or **A**look at this bud, what is it and what do I need to spray?@ -- sort of like you=re a plant doctor. A lot of people do bring in their items and we figure out their problems for them. Most of it=s spray. But some of it=s funny -- they=ll buy a \$6.99 azalea and spend \$20 for the stuff to grow it. So some of it=s kind of... it=s true, but they want the satisfaction of growing it -- they really don=t care about the money. So they by a \$4.99 bag of this and a \$6.99 bale of that -- and by the time they end up, that \$6.99 azalea cost them 40 bucks! But people do it for satisfaction -- why do you go fishing? Satisfaction, I suppose. Sit there at the bay, fish don=t talk back.

JL: That=s great. Those were all of my questions -- is there anything else that I should know about gardening or about people coming here.

FF: I think -- basically gardening, as I say, is done for personal satisfaction. And I think that=s basically -- people do get food and they do benefit out of it. But if you put it down to the majority of our customers, we get a lot of people that just come in... like that lady that you passed when you were coming down; she just wanted to come in to see something growing so she felt better. We have a lot of people who come in just to make themselves feel better.

Y=know, so as I say, from what you=re looking at -- as far as knowing how to garden - you put a seed in the ground -- as I say, it=s not brain surgery. Nothing to get too excited about. And if you care enough to watch it and do it right, it will work. And if you don=t care enough, that=s the way the world runs, what can I tell you. It is... we=ve proved in this town that it is a disease, like I call it, or a bug -- more people get it and more people do it -- if your neighbor is doing it there=s more going flowers going out - more of this and more of that. We used to run a gimmick... [describes how he tempted customers with free bedding plants their first year, so they would want to continue to grow.] There are some people, there are probably 10% of the people, that are almost fanatics who garden -- they have to have... their whole yard is gardens, if you want to call it that. They really get into, where the majority of people just do it for the enjoyment.

JL: That was so helpful, thank you so much.

[end of interview]