



# A GROWING CONCERN

## Botanical Interests: A Company Started from Seed

BY MARILYN NOBLE

**I**t seems like magic—the transformation of a small, hard chunk of protein, carbohydrates and oils into a lush, green thing that provides sustenance and beauty. It’s an annual rite of spring for gardeners the world over, planting seeds and waiting with anticipation for them to sprout and grow.

Curtis Jones understands the enchantment of nurturing plants from seed. “Once you try it, you get hooked,” he says. “It’s so magnificent that you can take something that small and grow something you can eat. It’s different from buying plants and transplanting—a whole different ball game. It’s very rewarding.”

Jones is the founder and co-owner along with his wife, Judy Seaborn, of Botanical Interests, a 15-year-old Broomfield company that sells vegetable and flower seed packets to garden centers and other retail outlets. The company grew out of Seaborn’s passion for gardening and Jones’s background in plant science. The couple thought other gardeners would be eager for better quality seeds as well as an education in growing those seeds.

That, and the fact that “I suffer from this genetic defect,” Jones laughs, “to work really hard, build an organization and make money. We also wanted less free time and more debt.”

The company has grown from the couple’s spare bedroom to an 18,000-square-foot warehouse, largely because of Jones’s and Seaborn’s dedication to delivering a high-quality product. “There are a million things that go into building a business, including luck, but having a good product is a prerequisite to it [the company] growing,” he says.

Curtis Jones, founder of Botanical Interests.

*Photo by Kirsten Boyer, kirstenboyerphotography.blogspot.com.*

Botanical Interests sources seeds from around the world, which allows for a year-round supply as well as insurance against an unproductive growing season for seed producers. Every batch of seeds is tested for germination rate and purity before packaging. Even if it falls just shy of the USDA’s standard 85 percent germination rate, it’s returned to the supplier. All of the seed stock is untreated and non-GMO and much of it is organic.

Quality control at Botanical Interests involves not only the product inside the packet, but its packaging—one of the company’s most recognizable assets. The envelopes are educational works of art—every packet is designed by an illustrator, many of whom are graduates of the Denver Botanic Gardens’ botanical illustration program.

Annually, all the artists gather at the Botanical Interests headquarters to brainstorm about new product packaging. Each envelope is graced with a watercolor reproduction of the plant along with pertinent details about its growing requirements. The back and inside include more cultivation tips and information about the species, as well as a brief bio of the artist who created the illustration. Jones calls it “selling the dream.” He wants gardeners to feel confident that their efforts will result in beautiful and productive plants.

To further Jones’s goal of educating gardeners, the company’s Web site is a trove of information about seed starting, planting and cultivation for dozens of different varieties of fruits, vegetables, herbs, flowers and ornamentals. For consumers who can’t find the seeds in their local retail outlets, the online store provides a means to purchase the products. The store also offers a benefit to the company in the area of market research. “It’s a nice thing,” Jones says of the Web site. “It’s not a big percentage of our sales, but by dealing directly

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with consumers, we learn a lot about things we should add, which ultimately benefits our retail stores.”

“I think we have the best overall selection of any seed company out there, not because of the number of varieties, but because we’re always changing, adding or getting rid of things,” Jones says. Seaborn and seed buyer Janice Kieft are always on the lookout for unusual varieties—Pumpkin-on-a-Stick, for example, an eggplant that dries on the stem and makes an eye-catching Halloween decoration, or the heirloom Italian purple pole bean, *Trionfo violetto*, that Seaborn says is fabulous for its color on the vine and outstanding taste. “I do like all my cool vegetables,” she laughs. The next two seasons will see the addition of a sunflower with edible seeds and a beet mix called Juicer’s Delight, which will include only nonstaining gold, yellow and white beets.

The company has also partnered with the Denver Botanic Gardens to create the Botanic Garden Series, a collection of native grasses and other adaptable plants that are in danger of being lost. Seaborn wants to spotlight the behind-the-scenes work done by the DBG’s botanists. “They do so much for horticulture, but you never hear about them,” she says.

Jones and Seaborn have a one-acre test garden in their own backyard, and many of the company’s employees also try out new varieties in their home gardens. Jones says the staffers pick seeds from their product list at the beginning of every season and then use light tables in the warehouse to get them started. In fact, being a gardener is pretty much a prerequisite for working at Botanical Interests. “People work for money, but they also have to like what they’re doing,” he says.

Jones is a seed evangelist—he believes everybody should have the experience of starting and growing seeds, even if it’s one small pot on a sunny apartment windowsill. “If you have one thing to choose, grow basil,” he says, “just because of the smell.” He adds that one packet of basil seed can grow the equivalent of hundreds of dollars’ worth of fresh, store-bought basil. “It’s crazy not to grow it yourself,” he says with a laugh.

He understands gardening’s many intrinsic benefits. “It educates kids so that they understand what farmers go through and how hard it can be to put food on the table; you’ve always got fresh produce, which tastes so much better than what you can buy at the store; you can grow things that you can’t find or that are too expensive in the store, like basil. And it’s amazing how much better food tastes with fresh herbs. That makes all the difference.”

For those who have never gardened or have limited space, Jones offers suggestions for container gardens: Easy-to-grow varieties of greens like different lettuces and spinach; herbs such as basil, cilantro and parsley; bush beans; peppers; radishes and tomatoes. “And I’d also throw in flowers, too, for color and because they’re so rewarding,” he adds. If you’re starting a small amount of seed and

don't use the whole packet, you may be able to save the remainder for the next season by folding the packet and storing it in a cool, dry place. Jones cautions that while many seeds will last a long time, some, such as chive, onion and edamame, degrade quickly and won't give a good result the next season.

Jones encourages all of us to connect with our inner children and discover the joy in starting plants from seed. "Most of the well-adjusted people I know garden," he says. "I don't know what the cause and effect is, but I do know that people get great satisfaction out of being alone and working with the soil. I don't know if it's the soil and the fresh air that cause them to be well adjusted, or if they're already well adjusted and so they garden, but whichever, gardening is a good thing for people."

And let's face it—who couldn't use a little more magic these days?

**Botanical Interests**

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Marilyn Noble is a freelance writer, editor and cookbook author who cooks and gardens in Littleton. She also serves on the board of Slow Food Denver and is happy to report that her seeds are sprouting.

If you're inspired to start your own garden from seed, check out these other local seed companies:

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