

Nanticoke Gardens founder sells business after 38 years

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TOWN OF UNION -- Nanticoke Gardens has a change in ownership, but the new management is made up of some familiar faces.

Endicott natives Ralph Shafer Jr., who goes by Chip, and his brother, Peter Shafer, bought the 38-year-old business this month from husband and wife Don and Jeanne Ferguson for an undisclosed amount.

Don Ferguson, 68, said he plans to spend his retirement from the business -- a self-described 24/7 job -- skiing in the winter, kayaking in the summer and traveling to see his grandchildren, who live outside the area.

He said he started Nanticoke Gardens when he was 30 years old, on what was a cow pasture off Union Center Maine Highway, where the business has remained.

Nanticoke Gardens has since grown to have 15 greenhouses, the Shafers said.

It's been for sale for five years, Don Ferguson said.

Handing the business over to the Shafers is "the best way to go. It was probably the only way to go to have it go successfully," Don Ferguson said.

"He has the ability," Don Ferguson said about Chip. "He knows how to grow quality plants. We've been known for quality plants. He can maintain that tradition."

Chip said his kindergarten class visited Nanticoke Gardens for a tour in 1979, when his "love of growing plants began." By 1999, he began working there as a grower/greenhouse assistant, moving his way up to production manager and gaining additional responsibilities.

Peter was an operations manager for a beer distributor in New York City. He called the Binghamton area a good place to raise his two daughters, ages 9 and 5.

"Our partnership is perfect," Chip said. "Pete can focus on the business so I can continue to grow great plants."

Customers can expect no major changes, Peter said. The brothers, however, are considering opening the business on Sundays and possibly accepting credit cards as a form of payment.

The business's retail season starts the last Monday in April and ends the last day of June, Peter said. In season, during its peak, there are about 20 employees.

But the work doesn't stop in the winter. The Shafers are now sowing seeds.

All of the plants sold at Nanticoke Gardens -- annuals, perennials and vegetable plants -- are grown onsite in more than 50,000 square feet of covered greenhouse space.

Peter said the business is known for its high-quality products and vast variety. For instance, Nanticoke Gardens sells 57 different kinds of tomato plants.

"I have to go by it every day when I go down my driveway," Don Ferguson said about the proximity of his home to the business. "It's going to be tough in a way. A lot of memories there for sure."