

ALTMAN PLANTS

Branch of national horticulture company employs some 255 locals

By Denise Gamino

GIDDINGS — One of the largest roadside flower attractions in Texas grows just west of this Lee County town, but it's hidden in plain sight.

Acres and acres of coral, fuchsia and purple flowers bloom inside the giant white greenhouses of Altman Plants. You can't buy flowers at this commercial nursery, but if you shop for flowers at Home Depot or Lowe's in the Bastrop, Austin or San Antonio areas, your plants probably grew up here, maybe even from seeds.

"Customers like to know that they're buying local," said Beth Verbeek, sales manager at Altman's. "If customers in Austin and San Antonio knew all their plants were being grown here, it might give them more confidence in their buying decisions."

Beth Verbeek runs Altman's with her husband, Kenney Verbeek, operations manager. He's a second-generation nursery pro, but she's a social worker by training. They met in 2007 when she worked in a Colorado plant nursery owned by his family.

"My learning curve has been steep" for eight years, she said.

The couple live in nearby Paige and have two sons, Adam, 3, and Alex, 2.

The Giddings greenhouse operation is the Texas branch of Altman Plants, the second largest U.S. horticulture company. Based in California, Altman's was started 40 years ago by a married couple with green thumbs.

"Ken and Deena Altman just loved plants," Beth Verbeek said. "They had an extensive



Jay Godwin photo

cactus and succulent collection and they had too many, so they started selling some of them and ended up creating a huge company."

Altman's bought the Giddings nursery in early 2014. The Verbeek family had operated it as Color Star plants to

service Wal-Mart stores but filed for bankruptcy in late 2013.

About 255 people work at this Altman's location. During peak season in late winter and spring, about 150 workers are busy in greenhouses, 30 others drive delivery trucks and

Altman Plant managers, husband-and-wife team Beth and Kenney Verbeek, stand amid the vast array of plants in one of the new, large greenhouses near Giddings. See more photos online at bit.ly/1EdnNyb.

another 75 workers are each assigned to a large retail store to manage plants on site.

"They receive the deliveries, put them on the tables, make sure they look good, and keep them stocked as people shop," Beth Verbeek said. "They're making sure our plants look good around the clock."

Altman's grows annuals and perennials year-round as well as chrysanthemums in the fall and poinsettias for the holidays.

New greenhouses dwarf this 140-acre property along U.S. 290 where Kenney Verbeek worked as a boy, watering plants before school each morning to save money for a dirt bike.

Kenney Verbeek jokes that he sleeps in the peat moss because he's so busy. Greenhouse space has grown as fast as the plants, expanding from half a million square feet to 1.6 million square feet — or 38 acres.

Growing plants in Texas is a challenge. Fans pull air through wet pads to cool these greenhouses in summer, and underground lines filled with hot water heat plants in winter. Rainwater and runoff are captured and circulated back to plants.

Operating the nursery doesn't allow the Verbeeks time for a home garden. But they do plant one thing on their new property: loblolly pine seedlings to repopulate trees burned in the 2011 Labor Day wildfires. ■

This is one in a series of profiles of Bluebonnet commercial accounts.