

THE MOTHER'S DAY PLANT SALE

Kay Wisniewski

Back in the 1970's and 80's, while most Moms observed Mother's Day by being served breakfast in bed or taken out to brunch, a group of St. John's parishioners had a completely different tradition: the Mother's Day Plant Sale. For just one Sunday of the year, the entire plaza in front of the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center overflowed with flats of tomato plants, market packs of annuals, and hanging baskets.

I think the original purpose was to raise money for hymnals to replace the tattered mimeographed booklets used for congregational singing. The parish was hard pressed for cash in those days, so Joanne Moroney and Helen Beyers, who chaired the Liturgy Committee, came up with the idea of a plant sale to raise the funds. Mother's Day was chosen with the idea that folks arriving for Sunday services could buy a blooming basket as a last-minute gift and get what they needed for their own gardens as well.

Joanne made it sound easy. She knew about a wholesale grower called Cherry Brae on Hall Shop Road in Clarksville. They would deliver a truckload of plants on consignment, but it was up to us to return any flats of unsold plants--provided they were complete and still in saleable condition.

Then Joanne heard about a small non-profit called Melwood that, among other things, trained people with developmental disabilities to work in the horticulture and landscaping business. They had greenhouses too; the catch was that we couldn't return unsold plants. We had to know what our customers would buy on that one day.

Judy Roberts, a wizard with a sewing machine, whipped up bib aprons—bright red with white polka dots and lots of pockets to hold pens and receipt books.

My husband Paul decided that we needed a really big sign at the corner of Trumpeter Road. He designed and painted a colorful sign, 4 feet high and 8 feet wide. To make sure the sign would withstand vandals and heavy winds, he attached the sign to vertical two-by-fours that required a post-hole digger to mount. Taking the sign down after the sale was almost as much work as erecting it!



We visited the two nurseries, agonized over the order slips, and prayed that spring would be warm enough for the geraniums to be “showing color,” as they say in the trade. Some years it rained, and some years it was so hot that we had to water the purple verbena baskets every 2 hours to keep them from flopping and blowing across the plaza. Our pre-teens were happy to help people ferry large orders to their cars.

Dozens of parishioners pitched in to help on Mother’s Day, including, Tom and Judy Roberts, Anne Cimonetti, Maureen and Jim Stoepler, Elizabeth and Tony Sianni, Helen’s husband Ron (a tomato specialist), and our assorted offspring. I know I have forgotten the names of many parishioners who worked hard on the sale, and for that I am heartily sorry.

Financially, the plant sale was a resounding success. One year we netted over \$2000, which was a lot of money in those days. So why did the Plant Sale stop? I think it was a combination of factors, including complaints from other congregations that the sale was obstructing entrance to the building. Also, many key workers had taken on full-time jobs and could no longer spend hours visiting the greenhouses during the week and then devote a whole weekend to the sale.

Looking back, I'm amazed that we had the nerve to undertake this with no prior experience in the nursery business. (I know my handwriting was shaky when I signed that first consignment slip.) These days I buy my plants at Frank's and get taken out on Mother's Day—but in my heart of hearts, I still miss the Mother's Day plant sale.