

5 MINUTES WITH —

TINA BEMIS



Top Photo: Ed and Tina Bemis. Bottom, left: An example of Tina's combination baskets. Bottom, right: A "Fine Foliage Pie" à la Tina.

By Teresa McPherson

Tina Bemis is co-owner, with her husband Ed, of Bemis Farms Nursery in Spencer, Massachusetts.

What drew you to this industry?

Like most others, I am simply fascinated by the magic of growing plants. I am forever taking pictures of when I plant something, then a few weeks later, then a few weeks later, then when the first flower opens up, and the day they're ready to harvest. I constantly look at my pictures and assemble them into picture mosaics using an app on my phone. I share those pictures with our customers hoping they'll get the same gardening bug.

What do you love about your job?

Along with growing the plants — which is a thrill unto itself — I really enjoy making all the moving parts fit together: from ordering to figuring out where it will all fit in the greenhouse and fields. What to price them at, what's the best place to display them in the retail greenhouse, and possibly designing a new container gardening workshop around something.

As a retail grower, there are about 100 steps from the idea of growing a plant to having it succeed in somebody's yard. Maximizing each step to be efficient and perfect is like a puzzle that is like a drug to me. If one piece is missing, the puzzle is not complete. When a customer sends me a picture of the final plant flourishing in their garden, I know all the steps leading up to it were worthwhile.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

First, because we teach over 300 workshops a year at our garden center, I wrote a book on how we do it. If anyone would like a free copy, email me for it.

Also, working in my own flower gardens and vegetable gardens, then cooking what I grow and having people over for dinner. I am currently combating COVID boredom by mixing horticulture and cooking by creating fancy pies and delivering them to neighbors. These "Fine Foliage Pies" pay homage to the book written by my friend and industry leader Christina Salwitz. It beats watching yet another movie on Netflix.

Favorite plant to grow? Why?

I guess it depends on what my emotional state is. There's the thrill of figuring out the easy crop that makes a lot of money and pays the bills, such as Wave petunias. We have perfected how to grow them cold, as well as use biological controls so they don't need spraying with any chemicals — a superb selling point at retail. They always bloom according to schedule and we pre-sell most of the crop online during winter and early spring, helping to eliminate the need for a line of credit.

Culturally, I get a big thrill out of growing mixed combination-style hanging baskets. I don't follow any of the national recipes. Watching them come in to bloom from something you designed in your mind is yet another drug for me. 🌱