

# It's planting time

Annual greenhouse  
heating bill  
hits \$7,000

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Despite Pugsutawney Pug's prediction of an early spring, the snowbanks are still high — and it's no time to be thinking about seeding. Unless of course you happen to be Quebec's biggest producer of indigenous and feral plants.

"We started heating part of one greenhouse the day before Groundhog Day," says Jean Daas, who with his wife, Isabelle Dupras, owns and operates Horticulture Indigo just off Highway 116 between Richmond and South Durham.

Over the next several weeks Daas will end up heating all five of his greenhouses which, in total, cover some 7,000 square feet of space. Last year, Indigo's greenhouses burned up close to \$7,000 in oil to maintain temperatures at a minimum of 18 Celsius. Daas doesn't expect this year's bill to be any lower.

One day last week 10,000 seeds were planted, and the aim for the following day was another 15,000.

"The work is all done by hand. The seeds are soaked; the good ones fall to the bottom of the pan and the vegetal debris floats to the top. Then one by one they're poked an inch deep into these starting trays. Later, after sprouting, each one will go into its own pot.

"Right now there are three of us working in the greenhouse, but at the peak of our season we'll be six, including a driver who makes deliveries across the province. We do about 80 per cent of our business between the end of

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April and the St. Jean Baptiste weekend."

"We're planting blue flags [now]," Daas continues. "They

were very popular last year and they'll be in even greater demand this year. We're expecting that for the next five years or so there'll be a lot of demand for plants like irises (blue flag is an iris), and Canadian lilies that do well in moist or marshy areas."

Daas can be confident in his prediction. Water-loving plants like those he mentions are a significant part of the solution to the problem of the proliferation of toxic blue-green algae which has plagued numerous lakes and waterways the last few years.

Isabelle Dupras, who has a degree in landscape architecture from the Université de Montréal, and who looks after the paperwork at Indigo, explains that it's the roots of plants, shrubs and trees that will eventually insure clean, toxic-free water.

"The Ministry of Sustainable Development and the Environment is on the right track. Not only are they looking at re-creating vegetation belts along shorelines, but they are also looking at the vegetation in the entire watershed. They are aware that plants, shrubs and trees are all necessary because they complement each other to create the equivalent of a sponge which holds and filters water."

For Daas and Dupras, who created Indigo in 1995 hoping to fill a niche market, the future has rarely looked brighter.

"Neither of us are Townshippers by birth," says Dupras. "I met Jean when he came to the University of Montreal as an exchange student. The following year I managed to go to his school in Belgium as an exchange student. We were looking for a place where we could take an idea and do something with it. We found this place through an ad in a Montreal newspaper. By luck it turned out to be an ideal location. Ulverton (our farm is on the very limit of the municipality) feels like the centre of Quebec."

The transplanted couple and their two school-aged children live in a refurbished clapboard farmhouse perched on a small rise of land that, a century ago, would have been prime real estate for its proximity to the Gore Railway Station. The station no longer exists, nor are there enough remaining houses to suggest even a hamlet, but Gore was once a stop on the milk run when steam trains chugged to and from Montreal several times a day.

"Our idea was to work with feral or indigenous plants."

Indigenous plants are native to the land; feral plants are domesticated species that have gone wild. "They're beautiful, they do well (Nature put them here!) and no one else was doing it. In 1993, when we moved here, only one garden centre in all of Quebec had any indigenous plants for sale," recalls Dupras.

When Daas and Dupras opened for business in the spring of 1995 they had less than a dozen species to offer. Even so, by virtue of being pioneers in their field, from the start they were the biggest wholesalers of indigenous and feral plants in the province. Still the biggest, but no longer unique, Indigo's greenhouses typically grow about 200 different species. Last year some 200,000 plants were sold. Garden centres — Indigo supplies some 40 garden centres across the province, including half a dozen in the Townships — bought the majority of those. Internet sales (which started two years ago) accounted for some 15 to 20 per cent of sales in 2007. About half of Indigo's customers are seeking ornamental plants. The other half are seeking environmental solutions to shorelines or reclaimed land. Indigo does no retail selling on site.

Starting the business meant hunting for



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On a planting day, Jean Daas pushes thousands of seeds into the earth.

plants. "We were armed with our copy of *Flore laurentienne*," smiles the Ulverton horticulturalist. "It was our Bible. We took it and started foraging forests and fields for plants and ferns." (*Flore laurentienne* runs to over 900 pages, originally published in 1935 by Brother Marie Victorin, which lists more than 1,500 species of flora which are found in the Saint Lawrence River watershed.)

"We've never taken plants from their habitat," Dupras points out. "We harvest the seeds, and when we can't manage to start a plant from seeds, we go back the next year and take a clipping to see if that will work. Poaching wild plants can be serious. There are some four dozen plants on Quebec's protected list and some of these became endangered because of commercial exploitation. Harvesting wild garlic, for example, can incur very stiff fines."

Some plants, like the blue flag, grow quickly and easily. Others, like the trillium, take time. "The trillium's seeds are ready for harvesting by the end of June," explains Dupras. "We bring them back here and plant them immediately in large vats where they sit for an entire year showing no signs of life. The second year the trillium puts up a small, single leaf. We leave the plants until they're five years old and ready to flower before we put them into individual pots. The trillium sells for \$12, but it took six years for us to bring it to market. For the customer, the plant is a life time purchase — a trillium can live 100 years."

Indigo, like a plant, has blossomed over the last dozen years. "It was a struggle at the beginning," Dupras admits. "We didn't reach our break-even point until our fourth year of operation. We now carry many more species and we sell seeds as well as plants. We're paying more attention to marketing. We print catalogues and we also have a website. We go to trade fairs and I sometimes give talks. For the last three years we've also been involved with green roofs. We've done about 10 in all, including one on the campus of McGill University."

Instead of asphalt, tin or tar, green roofs are covered with a thin layer of soil and then planted down with vegetation. While most easily suited to flat roofs, low-pitched roofs can also be green. "The idea is relatively new in Quebec," says Dupras, "but both in Europe and the States it's been accepted as a viable concept. It's hard to retro-fit onto existing buildings because re-enforcing a roof is not easy. But someone planning to erect a new building should think about a green roof. It can double the life span of the roofing membrane; the roof lasts for 40 years instead of 20. Portland Oregon now has a bylaw that stipulates that a certain percentage of new roofs must be green."

If you are interested in a green roof, or in hardy garden perennials, you might want to go to the Indigo website at [www.horticulture-indigo.com](http://www.horticulture-indigo.com) or phone 819-826-3314. It may be snowing, but spring is coming — *The Record's* own prognosticating Pugsutawney Pug can't be wrong.