

The Gitts family, owners of Swan Island Dahlias: Cooper Schloe, Nicholas Gitts, Linda Gitts, Heather Gitts-Schloe, Brendon Schloe and Gabrielle Schloe. PHOTO COURTESY OF SWAN ISLAND DAHLIAS

PART 3



GROWER PROFILE

**Swan Island
DAHLIAS**

PRODUCTION:

Wholesale 10%

Retail 90%

KNOWN FOR:

Dahlia production and the annual Dahlia Festival

PEOPLE

Nicholas and Linda Gitts, owners, and Heather Gitts-Schloe, marketing manager

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SWAN ISLAND DAHLIAS

Founded: 1927

THEY GROW NEARLY 400 different dahlia varieties at **Swan Island Dahlias**, and members of the Gitts family find immeasurable joy in sharing them with the world.

“The appreciation of the customers, and the enjoyment on their faces when they come here, is very rewarding,” said Nick Gitts, who owns the business along with his wife, Linda.

The tuberous perennials bloom in a wide variety of sizes, shapes and colors, providing gardeners with an endless array of dazzling choices. And each year, they add another 10–15 new varieties that they have hybridized on their farm in Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

“They all grow from the same type of root,” said Heather Gitts-Schloe, marketing manager and daughter of Nick and Linda. “It’s unique you can get so many sizes, shapes and colors from something that looks identical.”

Swan Island is the leading American grower of dahlias, pushing them out to the public via a robust catalog and online retail business.

For in-person traffic, Swan Island’s retail gift shop is open year round. It’s quiet most times, but every August and September, the quiet farm explodes into a bustle of activity. That’s when Swan Island hosts a

six-day Dahlia Festival.

Swarms of customers arrive to browse the fields, buy cut flowers and place orders for tubers to be shipped the following spring. With live music and food carts on site to beckon them, they often make a day of it.

The festival highlight is an expansive indoor cut dahlia display for Labor Day weekend, with more than 15,000 blooms carefully arranged by florists. This display is torn down, then created again for the following weekend.

The audience isn’t limited to Oregonians. Dahlia lovers will fly in from around the world to experience the colorful fields and immaculate indoor displays.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 didn’t allow the festival to take place in its usual form in 2020. The fields remained open, however, with protocols in place, including social distancing and masks required; sanitizer and wipes were provided. And people still came.

“We had people bring lawn chairs and sitting by their cars,” Heather said. “It was crazy. It was wonderful.”

The early days

Swan Island Dahlias was founded by Dick and Shirley McCarter in 1927 in





Portland, Oregon. They grew dahlias in the Sellwood neighborhood, which sits on a bluff overlooking the Willamette River. Their warehouses and offices were located downstream on Swan Island, which gave the business its name.

The McCarters sold their dahlias mostly wholesale, but also had a road-side stand in Sellwood, under the name Portland Dahlia Gardens.

Swan Island was where Portland's first international airport was located, but the airport soon outgrew the space and moved to its current site. In 1942, industrialist Henry J. Kaiser opened a shipyard on Swan Island. There, he built T2 tanker "liberty ships" for World War II. With all this activity going on, the McCarters needed a more suitable location.

They identified some Willamette Valley farmland they could rent, with rich, well-drained soil that is essential for growing and digging dahlias. It was located near the farming community (now exurb) of Canby. They moved the business there.

In 1953, the McCarters purchased 20 acres near Canby and moved the farm one final time, to its present site.

It was around this time that dahlias fatefully piqued the interest of a farmer some 270 miles away.

Nick Gitts Sr. ran a dairy and grew hay on his farm in Laurel, Washington, a small hamlet near the Canadian border. Nick remembers shoveling out cow barns, shoveling silage and running from the bull on his dad's farm.

Nick Sr. developed an interest in dahlias that soon flowered into an obsession. He cordoned off an acre of his dairy farm and created a small business called Laurel Valley Dahlias. He became friends with his fellow dahlia growers, the McCarters, and one day in 1963, they invited him and his wife, Margaret, to dinner.

Much dahlia discussion followed, but Nick Sr. thought it was nothing more than a great evening with friends.

Two weeks later, he opened his mailbox to find a letter from the McCarters.

They were retiring and had no one in the family ready to take over Swan Island.

They were offering to sell him their farm.

"Dad just jumped and said, 'Yeah! No more milking cows. We're going to move to Oregon and buy the dahlia farm,'" Nick said.

A paradigm shift

In these early days of the Gitts family owning Swan Island, their sales were 90% wholesale and 10% retail.

"We were cranking out volume for pennies," Nick said.

A major turning point 12 years later would change that equation.

In 1975, Nick Sr. and Margaret were offered the chance to purchase a fellow grower, Compton's Dahlias. The Comptons were ready to retire and their kids didn't want to take over the company.

Nick Sr. and Margaret thought about it, but didn't want to find themselves in the same position someday. They agreed



to buy Compton's on the condition that their two sons, Nick and Ted, would come back home and be partners in Swan Island. The two sons agreed and the purchase was made.

The sale included two key assets — Compton's planting stock and their wholesale customer list. This allowed Swan Island to increase its sales, but the owners concluded the added volume wasn't increasing their profit. That was a problem.

The solution was to begin a long and gradual shift to more retail.

"In the early 1980s, I decided to start spending a large part of our budget on magazine and other media advertising," Nick said. "This turned out to work very well and we were doubling our retail sales every four years. After about 10 years, we were able to start eliminating our big broker customers and focus on retail and direct wholesale to the garden centers, which paid more than the brokers."

Nick Sr. and Margaret retired in 1991, with Ted and Nick taking over. They divided their responsibilities.

Ted focused on everything that was happening out in the fields, planting, digging and hybridizing the tubers and supervising. Nick focused on inside office matters, including sales, marketing and human resources.

"We worked really well together," Nick said. "Whatever he said out (in the fields), I said, 'Go for it.' Whatever I said (in the office), he said, 'Go for it.'"

Meanwhile, Nick Sr. continued to hybridize even in

retirement.

"Dad was a dahlia lover," Nick said. "He spent so much time with his seedlings and he just glowed when he came in with something new and showed us in the office. He was so proud. He would take people on private tours of the seedling patch. He would go out of his way to show people what he had created and what he had done. Sometimes I get upset at myself for not taking more time and going in the seedling patch."

Tragedy and a new generation

That decade, Nick's two daughters, Heather and Jennifer, came to work for the family business. They established a website and began taking orders over the Internet. In a canny move, they grabbed the www.dahlias.com domain, positioning their business as the definitive



Dahlia 'Smooches'

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Swan Island Dahlias



PHOTO COURTESY OF SWAN ISLAND DAHLIAS

place to get the plant. (A new version of the site launched this year.)

Nick Sr. passed away following a battle with cancer in 2007.

In 2013, tragedy struck the family when Ted and his wife, Debbie, passed away in an auto accident. He was remembered for being a hard worker in the field and a dedicated outdoorsman when the work was done.

“He would work off hours and he had a cabin in Alaska,” Nick said. “Neighbors would say they knew when he was going fishing because the tractor was going all hours. He was a hard physical worker, dedicated to putting time in.”

When Ted passed, Nick was forced to shift his responsibilities to cover what Ted formerly did. “I had to go back outside and relearn everything and run the digging crews,” he said. “Luckily, (Heather) was here to do the inside stuff.”

A former schoolteacher, Heather found joy in coming home.

“I loved it here (growing up),” she said. “I always cut flowers and worked in the office every day after school. I really believed in supporting myself before I got married, so it was important to get my degree. I didn’t know that after my degree, I’d come back.”

Heather has developed expertise in next-generation marketing techniques, making use of Facebook, Instagram and Google advertising.

“I can’t believe the social media responses she gets,” Nick said.

Heather’s husband, Brendon Schloe, has assumed responsibility for the farm’s back-end computer technology. Linda retired from the business a few years back, and Jennifer recently moved on to other ventures.

COVID has tested the farm’s adapt-

ability and that of many event-driven retailers. Where Swan Island specializes in dahlias, other Oregon farms specialize in tulips (Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm), irises (Schreiner’s Iris Gardens) and others. These farms worked together to sell each other’s products. Swan Island was at various times selling tulip, iris and peony bulbs and cut flowers.

“We did it self serve, where people came in, took what they wanted, dropped money in a box and left,” Heather said. “It was a business change. It was adapting, allowing people who didn’t know what they wanted to come out to pick out their tubers.”

“It was just a feel-good spring during a very down time,” Nick said.

“All of us farms were kind of sharing each other,” Heather said. “It was an opportunity for us to get closer.”

When things get better, she plans to expand the gift shop and offer more events throughout the two-month blooming season to bring more people to the farm. The business is already go-go-go all summer,

but Heather sees more opportunities for growth and plans to keep pushing it.

“I’ve taken on so much in the office that I used to love cutting flowers, but business has grown so much that that’s not an option anymore,” she said. ☺



Dahlia ‘Cupcake’

PHOTO COURTESY OF SWAN ISLAND DAHLIAS