

The Aggie Garden of Eden

By KATHY O'CONNELL
Battalion Staff

You don't have to wait for a thunderstorm to see the colors of a rainbow. Instead, you can visit the rows of flowers at the Floral Test Gardens on the Texas A&M University campus.

The flowers in the garden located on Houston Street are changed seasonally, said grounds maintenance manager Bill Vitopil.

In the spring there are rows of brightly colored tulips and sunny daffodils. The summer varieties are usually an array of geraniums, portulacas and ornamental peppers. (No eating these, please.)

The autumn display features pungent chrysanthemums, with a multitude of hues ranging from maroon and white (Aggieland style) to gold and lavender.

The Floral Test Garden is a testing ground for new varieties of plants. "We test new varieties and All-American groups," Vitopil said. "We try to get new varieties that are currently on the market."

Commercial seed producers donate all the non-bulb seeds, he said, and most of them are hybrids.

Hybridization is the process of controlling cross pollination of one plant to another. In this process, specific color, foliage and heartiness of a plant can be achieved. Hybrids are preferred to self-pollinated varieties, Vitopil said, because

they are usually more vigorous.

Vitopil said the seeds are sown in the grounds maintenance greenhouses, located on South College Avenue. After allowing 10 to 14 weeks of growth, depending on the season, the plants are transplanted in the garden.

For something as exotic in appearance as the test gardens, not much money is spent on it. Vitopil said as little as \$200 is spent annually on the gardens, not including labor. This usually includes fertilizers and nutrients for the plants.

The soil in all the flower beds on the Texas A&M campus is Brazos bottom soil with peat moss added, he said. Brazos soil is noted for its rich red hue.

Sometimes there is an iron deficiency in the soil that causes some plant leaves to turn brown. Vitopil said a powdered iron compound is added to the soil to combat this iron deficiency, this supplement lasts two to three months.

If anyone is observant enough to notice the plant varieties change seasonally, he might wonder what happens to them. Vitopil said, with the exception of the chrysanthemums and bulbs, the plants are discarded.

He said people occasionally call and ask when new plantings will take place so they may retrieve the old plants. However, this is discouraged, he said, because some people might decide to yank out plants before the grounds maintenance

crew does the job.

"If people call," he said, "we'll take their name and give them a call, but we don't advertise that we're doing it."

Besides, Vitopil said, the plants are left in so long that it's difficult to replant them. There's usually a poor percentage of regrowth, he said.

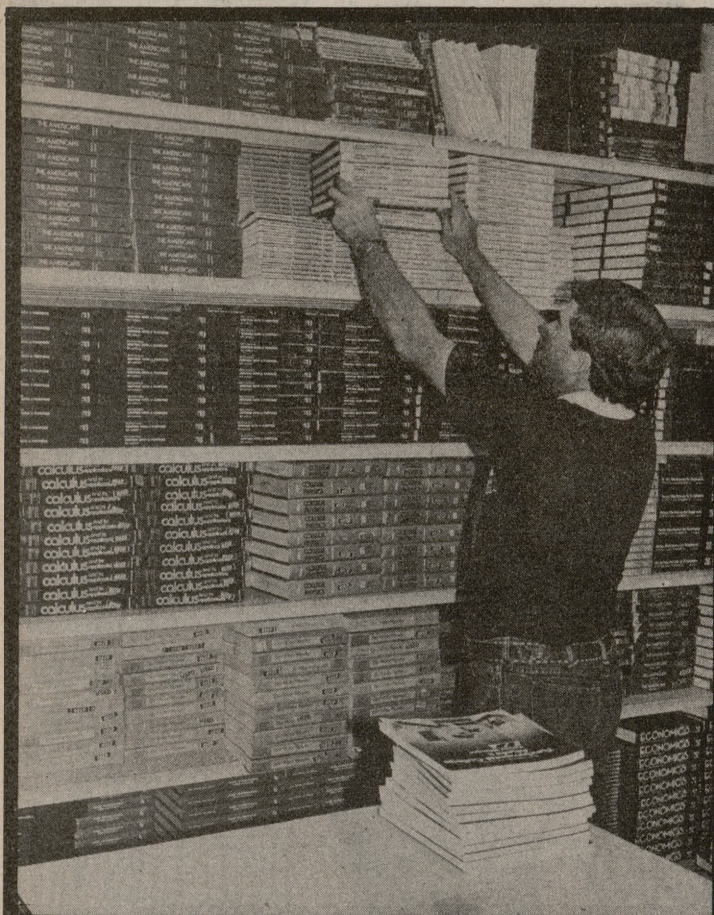
If you do happen to get an old plant from the garden and don't have success in growing it, you can always check the name of the plant that is labeled on each row. Each variety is marked with the name and a code that tells from where the flower came.



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