

Dominion Seed House answering that natural urge



Hilda Olsen puts together the "sales force" of the Dominion Seed House. The catalogues go to every post office in Canada.

In every post office in Canada the salesforce of a Georgetown company is at work selling a product which comes from every continent on the globe with the exception of Antarctica.

The "salesmen" are the brightly colored catalogues of the Dominion Seed House and the product they sell to Canadian gardeners exclusively is the more than 1,200 varieties of seeds for flowers and vegetables as well as bulbs and fruit plants.

In addition to the seeds, the company also sells books on gardening and cooking, greenhouses, fluorescent lights for indoor gardens, fertilizers, plant food, garden gloves, dusters, sprayers, seed sowers, cultivators and insecticides, said one of the first two employees hired by the company in 1928 when Dominion Seed House began their mailorder operations in Georgetown.

"The Canadian gardener is our lifeblood and we do not accept any outside orders for export which would prejudice our Canadian customers," the spokesman said.

Dominion Seed House erected their first building on their 63-acre plot on the corner of Guelph St. and Maple Ave. in 1931. A second building went up in 1936, a third in 1941 and the fourth in 1956. At peak season, now approaching, the plant has 110 workers, 70 of them part-time or temporary to assist the fulltime core of 40 workers.

Only a few seeds are produced on the company's site. Most of the seeds come from other parts of Canada or the United States, England, Holland, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, Costa Rica, Mexico and the Argentine.

"Our business is to know the types of plants and seeds suitable for the Canadian gardener," the company spokesman said, "...where they are best produced and how to process and handle the seeds."

He pointed out that there was a distinction between the production of seeds and the growing of flowers or vegetables.

"We do not buy seeds on the open market," he said. Instead, the Dominion Seed House deals with contract seed producers.

"It's a planned operation. We know the individual strains the seed producers may grow. We have our preferences. At times, it is a special strain or variety grown by an individual producer and which will be exclusive with us."

After the seeds arrive from their far flung locations, they are sorted on automatic counting and sorting machines which then package them in pound, half-pound, quarter-pound, ounce and fractional ounce sizes. A few seeds are still packed by hand.

Each variety of seed has its own number and is stored around the core of the main building where the mail orders are processed.

Much like old fashioned mail sorting, but in reverse, the envelopes of seeds are removed from the numbered slots to fill the order sheets which come from across Canada. The orders are then checked, packed and put on a conveyor belt which carries them to a metered postal

machine. At different times of the year different areas of the plant are used in filling orders and the conveyor belts through out the complex are controlled by a single operator at the postal metering machine.

Being a 100 percent mail order house means an unusually high volume of mail and Dominion Seed House have their own post office room in the main building.

"The postmen move in according to the volume of work," said the company spokesman, adding that the company gets "good co-operation" from the post office. As for the recent postal strike, it was "aggravating," said the spokesman, "but we survived."

To supply its customers Dominion Seed House works one year ahead and contracts for seeds to be sold in 1977 are now going out all over the world. Even the catalogue which is produced up to "camera ready" stage before being sent to a printer, is put together on the site.

A tiny print shop tucked away in a corner of a building fulfills the need for other sales literature such as price lists, fliers and pamphlets.

The company feels that the basic motivations of gardening is for the pleasure the gardener derives from growing things.

"Something in man seems to urge him towards that, to see something grow, even a vine," said the spokesman.

In the last two years they have noticed "some considerable drift toward vegetable seeds," and they

feel it is because of the high cost of vegetables in the supermarkets.

Another change noted in the last two years has been the growing popularity of indoor gardens under fluorescent lamps, he said. Many gardeners are using seeds to start plants rather than buying box plants. Other customers, "deep in the heart of Toronto without an ounce of soil around them" buy seeds, start them in their apartments, then transplant the seedlings to allotment gardens or cottage plots.

Over the years the number of seeds offered has not increased greatly, the spokesman said, adding that in 1930 about 1,000 varieties were offered compared with 1,200 now. It is not enough that a seed be "new" the spokesman said. It "must be superior to an existing variety or the gardener is wasting his time."

Because Dominion Seed House is entirely mail order, they feel they can offer gardeners a wider selection of seeds than can be found in wire racks in supermarkets and hardware stores.

Tomatoes, for example, come in 44 varieties ranging from a Tiny Tim tomato to a plant eight inches high, to a giant beef steak hybrid, to a yellow tomato especially low in acid content.

What you don't know about bean fills over three pages of the catalogue.

With its catalogue salesforce "Dominion Seed House has carried the name of Georgetown across Canada," said the company spokesman.

Not to mention the entire world.



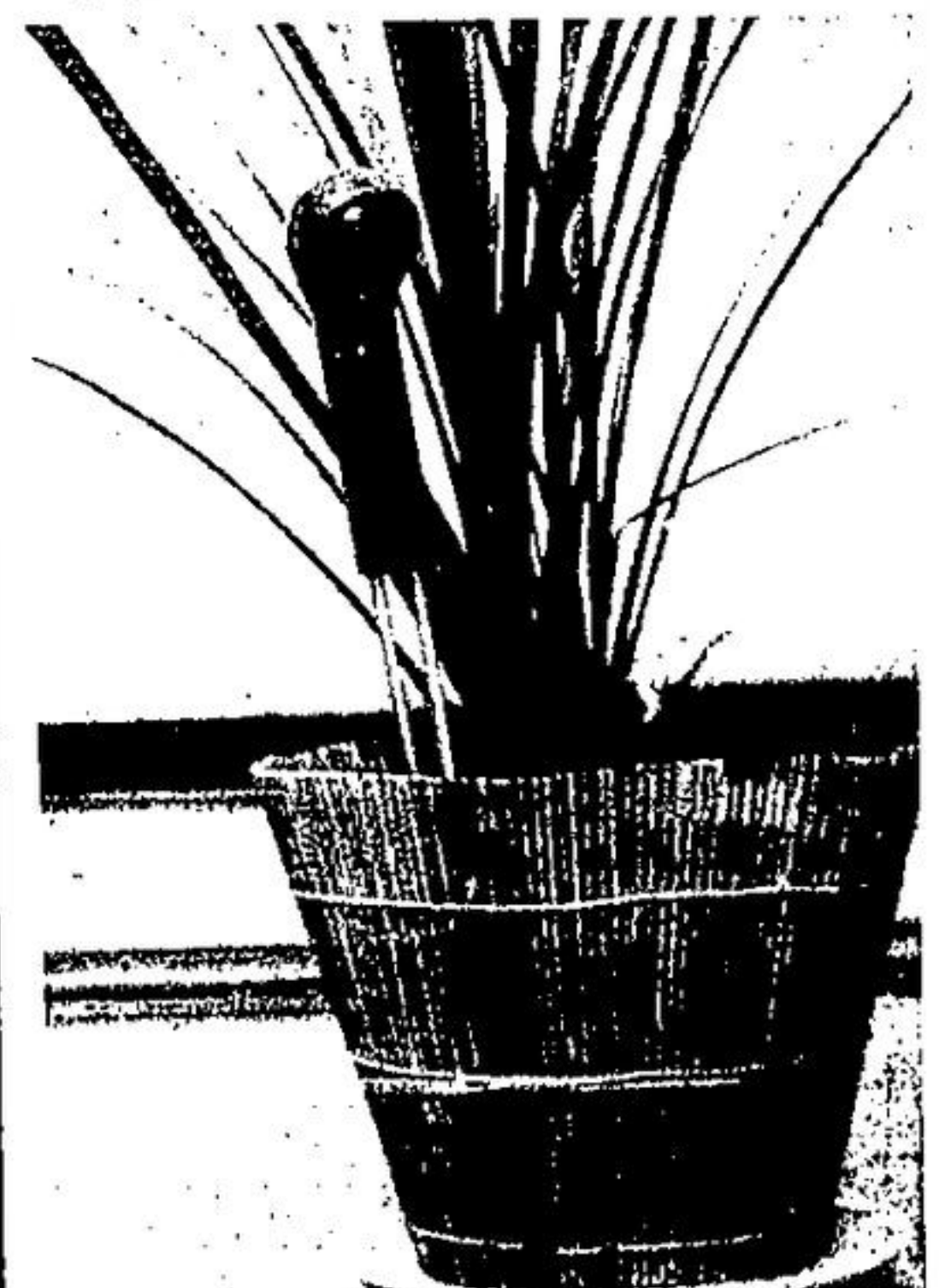
GERTRUDE SMALLWOOD packs, by hand, ornamental grass seed.



RUTH GOULD sometimes uses a magnifier to hand-pack tiny flower seeds.

Story and photos by George Evashuk

Now your plant can talk back



Now hear this. This plant communicator lets your plant "talk" to you.

You are supposed to talk to your house plants because it is good for them, right?

Right. And now your plants can "talk" back to you with the help of a "plant communicator" which lets you know if your favorite African Violet needs water or fertilizer or if you've given the Venus Fly Trap too much.

The battery-operated plant communicator has what looks like half of a toy telephone out of which come two prongs. These are inserted into the soil. The amount of moisture or fertilizer in the soil influences the degree of electrical conduction between the two poles.

This in turn determines whether your plant makes a slow "click...click...click..." if it is dry, or "purrr like a kitten" if the moisture content is just right. If it's too wet beware, like a diapered baby, it "cries."

The plant communicator, about 300 cms long, is imported from Taiwan and is available in seed house catalogues and from other supplies of horticultural items for about \$12.

So next time you are feeling lonesome and in need of "conversation" stick a plant communicator into the soil around your plants and hear what they have to say. Who knows, you King Coleus may have an important message for you or you'll finally get to understand what that carefree cigar plant has been doing the last three months to the split leaf philodendron.

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