

Meet Nicholas Gitts, the country's leading dahlia grower



More than 360 varieties of dahlias are still in vibrant bloom in the fields at Swan Island Dahlias in Canby, and visitors are welcome to wander the 35-acres of blooms and buy bouquets of fresh cut flowers through September 30.

“Exploring the dahlia fields is one of the Willamette Valley’s most popular agritourism activities this time of year,” said Mary Stewart, OSU Extension agriculture business and marketing development faculty. “The

impressive dahlia fields appeal to everyone, and photographers use the rich tones of autumn light to take stunning photographs.”

The fields are open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily through September—and sometimes into October, weather permitting--and the gift shop is open year ‘round from 9 a.m. through 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on weekends.

Swan Island Dahlias has been owned by the Gitts family for more than 50 years. Nicholas Gitts is the patriarch of the third-generation farm.

Nicholas’s parents bought the farm when he was 12-years old. His parents were originally dairy farmers and grew dahlias on the side as a hobby near the Canadian border in Washington. The previous owners of Swan Island Dahlias admired Nicholas’ father’s knowledge about dahlias and sold the 20-acre farm to him as a result in 1963.

The Canby property was originally a vegetable farm in the 1920s, and was turned into a dahlia farm in the ‘50s. The original owners of Swan Island Dahlias began growing flowers in Portland in 1927 before they moved in the ‘40s.

Nicholas grew up working the fields on the farm and then ventured off to college at Pacific University to major in business and accounting. He joined the farm full time 43 years ago.

There have been many changes on the farm within those 43 years. Sales have grown, new varieties have been created, and the business has shifted from wholesale to retail.

“Back in the ‘70s when we started, we were about 90 percent wholesale and 10 percent retail, and now we are 95 percent retail and 5 percent wholesale. I decided when I came back [to the farm] that retail

was a lot more stable. We started putting a lot of money into advertising and retail grew like crazy. We expanded our catalogue which has really done well for promoting the retail part of it," said Nicholas.

The farm is home to more than 360 different variations of dahlias. A stand located on the property is stocked with 20 dozen fresh-cut flowers each day that are available for purchase during the farm's flower growing months, however the stand is probably less than 10 percent of the business.

"The main business is the tubers in the ground. We plant these every April through May and dig them in the winter. They are processed all winter and shipped out in the spring for people to plant them and then we replant our fields. We have about 15 employees in the summer and 35 in the winter. This is kind of a 12-month operation," said Nicholas.

Though the farm requires a lot of hard work year-round, compliments from customers make it worthwhile for Nicholas.

"When you have customers coming this time of year, and you hear the compliments and joy they get from seeing the flowers, it's very rewarding. By the end of October I'm tired of looking at the flowers, but every year when they regrow again, it's like starting a whole new generation. I enjoy the springtime when everything is growing again. People fly in here or drive from all over the country to see this," said Nicholas.

According to Nicholas, it is almost time to retire. Luckily, he has his two daughters, Jennifer and Heather, to take charge.

"They've been here a long time. They started doing cut flowers when they were in their teens. Jennifer was a nail and hair tech for a couple years then came back here, and Heather was a schoolteacher for a year or two then budget cuts came in and she came back. Luckily, they came back in the '90s when the websites were booming. They got our website up and got all of that stuff going. It was kind of nice that their generation was able to take over the selling, google ads, Facebook and all this other stuff so I don't have to worry about that," said Nicholas.

The annual dahlia festival takes place the last weekend of August and first weekend of September at the farm when visitors can enjoy around 15 thousand flowers professionally arranged on display, food vendors, live music and talks about dahlia culture from Nicholas and his daughter, Heather, all open to the public with no charge.

More information is available from 800-410-6540 or dahlias.com.

Swan Island Dahlias is a founding member of the Canby Farm Loop, which is part of Oregon Farm Loop. Connect to this farm stop through website CanbyFarmLoop.com, Facebook, or Instagram, or email: farmloop@gmail.com and sign up for monthly e-newsletters by texting "ORFARMLOOP" to 22828. Oregon Farm Loop connects local family farms and value-added businesses with the local and traveling

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