

Ohio Couple Shares Love Of Flowers

By Carolyn White

Michael Mullen of Marietta, Ohio, went off-grid for 5 years in the '70s, learning as much as he could about raising, canning, and preserving vegetables and herbs. The experience paid off. "Once you start growing stuff, you always grow stuff," he says.

In 2021, Claire, Michael's wife of 25 years, added a flower crop to the peppers, squash, carrots, onions, zucchini, tomatoes, and green beans they raise on their 2-acre property. She figured they could make extra money by selling bouquets at local farmers markets.

Originally from Parma, Ohio, Claire did not have gardening experience growing up, but "Mike and YouTube taught me." Before long, their greenhouse and yard were blooming with annuals like zinnias, cosmos, celosia, Amaranthus, asters and basil (for decorative greenery) and biennials like snapdragons, canterbury bells, scabiosa and godetia. The couple even grows corms, bulbs, and tubers such as gladiolus, dahlias and tulips.

Michael said, "We learned by the seat of our pants." This has included building raised beds and installing an irrigation system. Water is collected off the roof into a 300-gal. rain barrel. "We've gotten smarter, better and faster every year as we've learned what works and what doesn't. You have to water and add nutrients at the right time."

He and Claire start their seedlings in the basement, transferring them to a propane-heated 20 by 20 greenhouse when they get stronger. This helps because "we have frosts and freezes between February and May."

The goal is to be early in the market and stay late. "We adjust as all growers do. It has worked well, but we're still at the whim of the weather."

Claire admits that if they were starting over, they'd do a few things differently. "I would've thought more about infrastructure, drip lines, and being better prepared."

However, she has figured out what works best for the growing year. "I've learned the life cycles of annuals, hardy annuals (or biennials), and perennials. These diverse groups require starting seeds during different months of the year. In addition to planting seedlings indoors during the heat of the summer, in air-conditioning, I winter sow shortly after Christmas, so the seeds that need to be cold-stratified can do so naturally. It's a year-round endeavor."

Compost is important to success, and the



Photo courtesy of Michael and Claire Mullen
Michael and Claire Mullen grow flowers in a propane-heated 20 by 20 greenhouse so they can sell early and late season.

Mullens have their own mini-compost facility on site. "I work part-time at a hotel," Claire says. "The chef allows me to take home a significant amount of kitchen waste every week."

Each season, a County Extension Agent tests the soil's pH levels. He then comes to the home to see what's scientifically needed to balance the plants, helping to determine what goes into soil amendment.

It amounts to "a little bit of science and a whole lot of luck. And we have to consider Mother Nature. With global warming, our frost dates have gotten earlier, and summers have gotten hotter."

They're constantly on alert for any fungus, blight or varmints. Although there's deer fencing around the flowers, Claire says, "We deal with rabbits, chipmunks and groundhogs."

Planting goes on all year at "Moonville Farm," as they have named their little property. "We're in the geographical middle of the city, but our place is surrounded by woods and perpetually green spaces, which gives us plenty of privacy," Michael says.

The Mullens must work around city zoning codes. "Customers aren't allowed to come here and pick their own bouquets as it might disturb the neighbors. We can't have a roadside stand, either. That's why we do farmer's markets."

Michael considers himself fortunate to live where he does with the land that he has. "We're just semi-retired, small-scale farmers. In the end, you have to do what you love and what makes you feel whole, especially now that we're in the fourth quarter of our lives."

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Troyer mounted a belt-driven hydraulic pump to the electric clutch intended to power a mower deck.

He Added Hydraulics To His Garden Tractor

Samuel Troyer made his 212 Deere garden tractor even better by adding hydraulics. He always preferred the 212 over later versions for its pulling power and lack of hydrostatic drive.

"My brother brought a wagon loaded

with 140 small square bales to our farm but couldn't get it to the elevator," says Troyer. "I hooked on with the 212 and pulled the wagon up a slight grade and into place. You can't do that with the newer, lighter garden tractors with hydrostatic drive and hydraulics, all of

Hitch-Mount Flagpole Showcases Patriotism

EZPOLE Flagpoles is a U.S.-based company that makes and sells products designed to showcase pride in being an American. One highlight is a flagpole hitch mount.

"Our Hitch Mount is heavy duty enough to handle highway speeds, says Dennis Laska, EZPOLE spokesperson. "We want you to show off your pride of country on the go. And everything's made in the USA, right in Eastlake, Ohio."

The Hitch Mount Flagpole Holder works with sectional flagpoles up to 2 in. dia. (the outside diameter is 2 1/2 in.). A dual-locking system with pins and thumbscrews secures the flagpole, even when traveling at high speeds. It comes with a durable, powder-coat finish to prevent rust and erosion, even after many miles on the road. "You can take the Hitch Mount camping, tailgating, and on the farm, says Laska. "You can still put the tailgate down to access your truck bed and leave the flagpole flag flying in your Hitch Mount."

Each kit comes with a 2-in. by 72-in. polished aluminum flagpole, a 3-ft. by 5-ft. nylon USA embroidered flag, a 2-in. hitch mount flagpole holder, a 5/8-in. trailer hitch pin, both a top and bottom swivel kit, a safety coupler pin, a thumb screw, a 3-in. silver ball ornament, and a hitch tightener kit. It retails for \$199, with free shipping offered for all orders over \$100. It's also possible to skip shipping fees by visiting EZPOLE's retail

which add to their cost."

Troyer likes fixing up garden tractors for resale. The hobby gives him many chances to compare his old favorite with others.

"With a manual transmission like the 212, the drive is controlled by your feet, and it's easy to turn around," he says. "The only problem is it has a manual lift, no hydraulics. I couldn't use it with a plow or other attachments like a snowplow or snowblower."

Troyer mounted a belt-driven hydraulic pump to the electric clutch intended to power a mower deck. The pump can produce up to 2,300 psi. Removing the front grill made room for a hydraulic reservoir between the uprights the hood hinges to. Then, he installed a three-bank of hydraulic valves by the seat.

"I mounted a cylinder under the seat for a 3-pt. hitch, a port under the toolbox at the rear and one on the left side at the front," says Troyer.

He fabricated a 3-pt hitch for the rear after modifying the OEM hitch. "The stock hitch is ahead of the rear wheels, which makes it easy to jackknife if turning tight with a trailer," says Troyer. "I built back from it and raised it with a pair of steel plates that form a sleeve. I can slide one of several 4-in. wide steel plates into the sleeve and pin it in place. One plate has a 1 7/16-in. ball; another has a hole for a standard hitch pin."

He fabricated a 3-pt. hitch like one on his Deere 140 and bolted it to the tractor's backplate. The cylinder under the seat pins to a clevis lever on the rocker arm of the 3-pt. to lift and lower the 3-pt.'s lower arms.

"The cylinder provides enough down pressure that when I have the single bottom plow attached, I can nearly lift the rear of the tractor," says Troyer.

The port at the rear can be used as an auxiliary for hydraulic attachments, while



Dual-locking system with pins and thumbscrews secures the flagpole, even when traveling at high speeds.

location in Eastlake.

Pride in America is a leading motivation for the EZPOLE Flagpoles. "Our Parent company is TD Fabricating," says Laska. "It's a father-son company that started in 1991 with tube bending and stamping." In 2002, the business began to pivot into flagpoles. "We wanted to compete against China," he says. "And we take pride in making flagpoles for our veterans. They have sacrificed so much for us to make them here. But we make them for every American that wants to fly our American Flag on a flagpole made in America."

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the one on the front is used with Troyer's snowplow and snowblower.

When he first bought the 212, Troyer replaced the original turf tires with ag tires and added weight to the rear wheels for traction. He also added a chrome straight pipe to the front corner of the tractor frame.

"The exhaust on the 212 is under the hood," says Troyer. "I mounted the pipe just for fun and ran flexible tubing from the motor to the bottom of the chrome pipe."

With the 3-pt. in place, he needed weight on the front to counter rear attachments. Having removed the grill, he fashioned a brush guard for protection and added weight.

"I got some steel grate from dairy barn gutters from a local scrap dealer and used it for the lower half of the brush guard, extending it out past the front wheels," says Troyer. "I wanted the upper half narrower and removable so I could open the tractor hood. I welded short pieces of 1 1/4-in. steel tubing to the lower half and framed the top half of the brush guard with 1 1/2-in. steel tubing. It just slips in place until I need to remove it."

The grate portion of the brush guard hooks into a quick-attach for front attachments. A reinforced hole in the grate provides access to a 12-volt winch mounted to the tractor frame and under the hydraulic oil reservoir. It's easy to remove when mounting the snowblower or front blade.

"The brush guard adds about 20 lbs. to the front end, and the oil reservoir adds a few more," says Troyer. "We have less than two acres, so we don't need a larger tractor or skid loader. The 212 does all I want to do and doesn't tear up the yard."

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