



Veseys – eight decades strong and still growing

Commitment to quality stems from founder's market-garden roots



All products sold by Veseys, including offerings in its extensive bulb collection, are tested annually on site. Visitors to the headquarters in York, P.E.I., are welcome to wander the colourful Flower Trial Gardens.



The turnip harvest at Veseys in the 1960s. The seed company was launched 80 years ago by Arthur Vesey, who was also a commercial grower. Bev Simpson (inset, in 1966) became an employee at age 19, and took over the company with his wife Shirley after Vesey retired in 1979. (Contributed photos)



Employees doing a final check on a customer's order in 1962 (left). Corn samples (right) picked from seed trials to be tested for taste, quality, and consistency.



By Nicole Kitchener

Vesey's headquarters, in the rural community of York, Prince Edward Island, is a twisty warren of hallways, rooms, staircases, nooks, and crannies. A series of additions have been built on over the decades. At the building's heart sits founder Arthur Vesey's house and small shop where he first sold vegetable seeds in the late 1930s. Although Vesey died in 1999 at the age of 92, you can almost sense him walking with you across each creaky floorboard and around every corner, marvelling at what his business has become – the largest mail-order gardening company in Canada.

This year, Veseys celebrates its 80th anniversary. (The company recently dropped the apostrophe from its name, to avoid confusion when customers go online to find www.veseys.com.) Just as the head office has expanded through the years to encompass Arthur's home and store, so too has the company continued to embody his values – commitment to quality, devotion to the customer, and staff appreciation – thereby maintaining high regard and reputation in the gardening world.

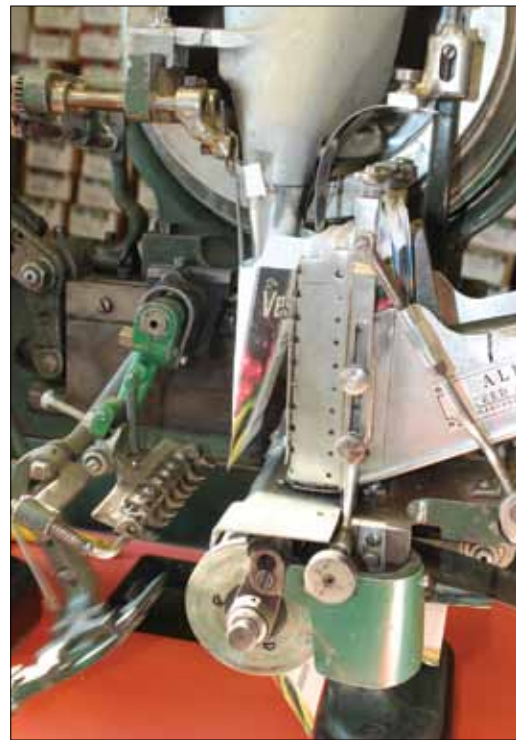
Much of the credit goes to B.E. Simpson, the company's president. Now 81, Bev, as he is known, became Arthur's employee when he was 19. The two became partners, working side-by-side until Arthur retired in 1979, at which point Bev took over the business with his wife Shirley.



Cultivating between the rows at Veseys. Field trials have always been a key part of the business.



Pauline Hager operating a circa-1950s seed packaging machine, still very much in use today at Veseys. Seeds are dropped into a hopper and a predetermined quantity is fed into the packets. Replacement parts for the machine must be made from scratch, as they are no longer manufactured. (Nicole Kitchener photos)



Bev recalls Arthur as a unique man with talents in a number of areas – music, theatre, business, “and, of course, gardening.” He possessed a dry wit, was a bit of a jokester, and loved dabbling in magic. “An honest and hard-working individual, Arthur had an innate ability to judge character and recognize the talents that existed within staff,” says Simpson. “Never motivated by money, Arthur’s passion was ensuring the success of his gardening customers, and he was always cautious that the company didn’t get too big, so that the many details of running the company were never overlooked.”

Arthur fell into the business rather organically. A market gardener, he was keenly interested in procuring and testing vegetable seeds to determine which varieties best suited the region’s short, cool, growing seasons. Friends and neighbours, noticing Arthur enjoyed better growth and yields than they did, asked if he would buy extra for them when ordering his seeds. This prompted him to establish a retail store in his home. Then, in 1939, he launched a 16-page, black-and-white listing of vegetable seeds to which he had access. Distribution was primarily within his own little network, and

people throughout the Maritimes who had caught wind of this successful grower in P.E.I.

Today, Veseys circulates more than a million copies of its full-colour catalogue, which runs up to 170 pages,



John Barrett—director of sales, marketing, and development – has been with Veseys for 22 years. He is one of many employees who have logged decades at the company.

offering home and commercial gardeners an array of vegetable, fruit, flower, and herb seeds, spring and fall bulbs, starting plants, and equipment. Orders come in from customers in every Canadian province and U.S. state.

“We pretty much cover the spectrum of everything a gardener would need,” says John Barrett, Veseys’ director of sales, marketing, and development.

BRING ON THE BULBS

Arthur’s 40-acre farm in York remains the company’s base, comprising offices, seed laboratories, packaging facilities, storage, and a small retail shop. Another building houses a separate division, Veseys Equipment, which sells large commercial machinery to golf courses, municipalities, and parks in Atlantic Canada. The property also includes a shipping facility for seed-catalogue items, and indoor and outdoor areas for research and seed trials. Bulbs are packed and shipped twice a year from a 28,000-square-foot building at a nearby industrial park.

Veseys employs about 75 full-time staff members, with that number reaching around 100 during the busy seasons. Many employees have been with the company for several decades. “I’m still one of the newer people on staff, and I’ve been here 22 years,” laughs Barrett. Bev, now into his 63rd year at Veseys, is still at his desk daily, with his son Gerry Simpson by



The bulk of the company’s operations remain on Arthur Vesey’s original 40-acre farm in York, P.E.I. (Contributed photos)

his side as vice-president.

“As a family-owned business, we recognize that our success is the result of our team of dedicated and committed staff,” says Bev. “Without the wide range of talents that exist within our employees, we would never have been able to reach our current family of satisfied customers, nor would we have been able to expand our product offering to the thousands of items we now have on offer.”

While the array and number of items in the catalogue grew over

time, Veseys’ 60th anniversary, in 1999, marked something of a turning point. Having already established an internet presence three years earlier, it launched an e-commerce platform, making it one of the first gardening operations in the world to do so.

“We also decided to get into the bulb business,” says Barrett. Veseys is now Canada’s largest importer of Dutch bulbs. Each of the spring and fall bulb catalogues introduces as many as 100 or more new varieties.

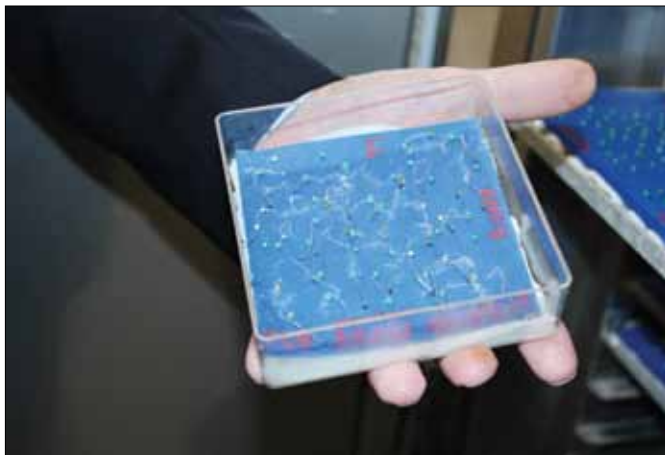
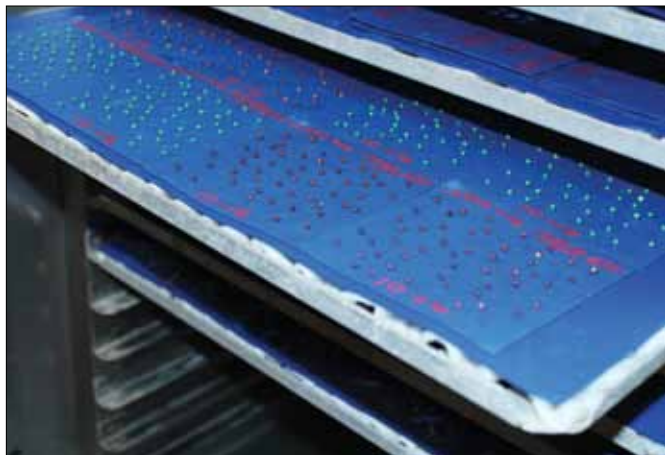
A significant portion of the com-



Arthur Vesey aboard a nifty little tractor.



Packing orders for delivery by Canada Post in the mid-1960s. Baskets (see far right) are still used to gather items for orders.



In the company's laboratory, seeds are arrayed on blotters and placed in a machine that mimics daily light and temperature changes, to determine germination rates. (Nicole Kitchener photos)

pany's bulb trade is generated from its fundraising program. With the volume of bulbs Veseys purchases, it can offer non-profits, schools, and other organizations a higher margin than many other fundraising programs – 50 percent of total sales. There is no charge for the special bulb catalogue or other materials and support for groups that sign on.

TESTING AND TRIALING

From the beginning, testing of seed and plant varieties has been an imperative. Field trials are conducted on every type of seed offered for sale or under consideration, says Barrett. In the laboratory, certified technicians test for germination rates and quality.

"We only sell to the Canada number-one standard set by the government. We self-impose that standard on ourselves. That's why every lot of every seed that comes in to us runs through our lab for a whole series of tests. All that information is recorded, and if that seed isn't up to the standard we want, we won't sell it."

Testing and trialing is mainly for the benefit of Veseys' commercial customers – ranging from large operations such as Nova Scotia's Oxford Frozen Foods, to smaller growers selling at farmers' markets.

"If you buy a package of carrot seeds and you plant six feet in your backyard and you don't have the greatest success with them, well, it's not the end of the world," Barrett says. "If you just bought enough seed to plant 100 acres of carrots, and your livelihood depends on a certain germination

rate and a certain yield per acre, and you don't get that, it's the difference between your farm turning a profit or whether you're going to the bank."

However, the benefits trickle down to Veseys' largest customer base, the home gardeners. "It's a little upside down," remarks Barrett. "We do all this extra work and go to the expense for a small portion of the business. But you have to look at our roots, right? Arthur Vesey and Bev Simpson were commercial produce growers. And as long as their heritage continues, we'll always have that emphasis, even if it is a smaller part of the business."

BEE PROMOTION

Veseys also produces customized seed packages for various organizations, corporations, and events such as weddings. This aspect of the business led to one of the company's most substantial endeavours. In 2016, Veseys partnered with General Mills Canada on a national campaign called "Bring Back the Bees," centred around North America's dwindling bee population and the Honey Nut Cheerios brand. Consumers were directed to a website where they could sign up for a free package of Veseys' specially formulated "bee friendly" wildflower seed mix.

The promotion generated some bite-back from critics in traditional media and social platforms during its first couple of years, especially after expanding into the U.S. market in year two. The main complaint was that the seeds were non-native species, and therefore potentially invasive.

Another rumour circulating was that the seeds were genetically modified.

The criticism certainly didn't thwart the promotion, which survived and thrived. Changes for 2019 include expanding the campaign across the entire Cheerios line, and a departure from wildflowers. Instead, Veseys will produce 520,000 packages of sunflower seeds. Barrett, who formerly owned a 50-acre sunflower farm in P.E.I. before landing at Veseys, says bees are attracted to the plant.

"No one can have any issues with regards to invasiveness, because the sunflower is an annual," he points out. "It's an easy flower to grow, everybody loves them. So we'll see what the reaction is."

Barrett admits Bring Back the Bees isn't a huge money-maker for Veseys, but he says it's great publicity. "We like having our name on a million packages of seeds, with our name, our address, and our website on millions of boxes of Cheerios. It heightens our visibility. Plus, we genuinely are concerned about the whole bee thing. There is a deep-rooted concern there."

Veseys has maintained a conservative approach to expansion and growth, and one of the company's strengths is its self-reliance. Other than the printing of catalogues by Ottawa's Lowe-Martin, and product coming in from various sources around the world, the company doesn't "depend on anybody for anything," says Barrett. "We kind of control our own destiny."

That destiny could include a couple of plans currently under discussion, one of which is the creation of a

flagship retail store in Charlottetown. Although York is a mere 10 kilometres from the capital city's downtown, many people consider it a trek into the country. "We're kind of out of sight, out of mind," says Barrett. The store would carry the entire product line, including the commercial power equipment, under one roof. It would also include a learning centre, with space for seminars and classes.

Another ambition is to refine the company's wholesale division, which currently sells seeds to 31 stores in Atlantic Canada. "It's not the most organized program," Barrett acknowledges.

In the meantime, Veseys is commemorating its 80-year milestone in a few ways. A contest for bulb-catalogue purchasers was rolled out last fall, and this April the winners will enjoy an eight-day, all-expenses-paid river cruise during tulip season in Holland. Another initiative has been the naming of two new tulip varieties in honour of Bev and Shirley Simpson's mothers – a huge undertaking, requiring various registrations and approvals.

Perhaps most notable is the special 2019 seed catalogue. Instead of the usual flower or vegetable photo, the cover features an illustration by Canadian artist Kerry Hodgson, commissioned to commemorate the company's rich heritage and history. The unique image has elicited such a response, 100 limited-edition posters have been produced for sale.

What would Arthur think of Veseys eight decades after his first modest catalogue was created? "He'd be very excited. He was a very progressive guy," says Barrett.

Adds Bev, "His memory will live on by the standards we set for ourselves each day."

(Nicole Kitchener is a freelance journalist and photographer whose work mainly revolves around animals and rural life. She lives on a small farm in Prince Edward Island with her husband, eight horses, a dog, and far too many cats.) ●

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