

# 'Geranium cowboy' rides herd on greenery

By MARK CLAUSEN  
His beard-encrusted mouth puffs on a curved-stem pipe, its bowl carved in the shape of a bull's head.

Atop his head sits a felt, wide-brimmed Stetson with the words "Geranium Cowboy" emblazoned on the front in block letters. On each side, a full geranium bloom sticks out from the hatband.

John F. Wendland, senior groundskeeper at Oakland University, first coined his nickname as a CB radio code name, but it transcends "breaker" slang.

"I really like Western clothes and music and that kind of stuff," he says, explaining why the Cowboy half of his nickname is natural. Discolored cowboy boots and Petoskey stone western tie-strings bear him out.

But even more natural is the Geranium half of the name.

As senior groundskeeper, Wendland, 47, is in charge of maintaining O.U.'s shrub and flower beds, including more than 2,000 geraniums.

"I'm kind of a geranium nut. You can never know enough about them," the Royal Oak resident says.

Wendland, a self-taught horticulturist, belongs to geranium societies in the United States, England, Europe and Australia. He gets advice from area nurserymen and does extensive readings on the more than 5,000 varieties of

geraniums and their hybrids.

Last year he was asked to display his geraniums at the national and state garden club convention in Renaissance Center.

ALTHOUGH PETALS are dropping off geranium plants around the O.U. campus, the Geranium Cowboy is still riding hard. His plants were recently on display at Oakland Mall and he gave lectures to garden groups there.

He has no secret for his success, just standard care and "if something works for you, don't change it."

According to Wendland, geraniums are annuals that can be grown indoors or out, but which do best in dry porous soil and adequate sunlight when days are warm and nights cool. He likes to place regular geraniums in large color blocks of pink and red in campus flower beds.

One of Wendland's major innovations, he says, is starting geraniums from seed instead of cuttings from mature plants. This trims flower costs.

There is another benefit. "The seed geraniums outperform the cut ones," says Wendland. "They are more heat-resistant and come on strong in the second half of the summer."

WENDLAND'S INTEREST in plants goes beyond simple nurture and maintenance. He is now raising scented geraniums and says the leaves can be used for cooking or perfume.

The leaves of these plants have lemon, nutmeg, peach and other scents, he maintains.

Some of the leaves have become flavoring for Wendland's geranium jelly. He hopes someday to publish a recipe book about cooking with geraniums.

The geranium year starts in early December for Wendland, and for crew member Darold "Pops" Leist and volunteers from Meadow Brook Hall who help work the greenhouse.

First, seeds of all annuals needed for next year—20,000 plants in all—are planted in trays at the glass and stone university greenhouse near Katke-Cousins Golf Course on the east campus.

When seedlings reach three to five inches high they are transplanted into clay pots and cared for until they are

planted outside in frost-free days of late spring.

THE SIX-ROOM LORD and Burnham greenhouse, built by auto pioneer John Dodge in 1914, does not have many of the conveniences of newer greenhouses. It also needs to be completely renovated, Wendland says.

"We don't even have a fan" to keep air circulating, he says. When asked where the sprinkler system is, Wendland points to a garden hose with a brass nozzle, sitting in the corner.

There are more than 500 types of plants in the greenhouse, including 20-foot tropical plant trees pushing through the ceiling glass, eight-foot prickly pear cacti, plants in hanging baskets and five-inch cuttings in the tropical plant propagation room.

Even floors and areas under water pipes are covered with leafy growth. "I got tired of pulling weeds, so I decided to leave some ground cover there instead," said Wendland, pointing to ground cover plants beginning to spread onto the walkways.

PLANTS WILL GO on sale when the greenhouse opens to the public during the "Christmas at Meadow Brook" presentation after Thanksgiving.

Tending flower and shrub beds is not Wendland's sole responsibility. In winter he is called on to join the grounds crew in snow removal. "Nobody is exempt from shoveling snow," says the "Cowboy."

A FORMER MILKMAN, Wendland came to the university in 1970. He

started as a janitor, got transferred to the grounds crew where he was in construction, on the grass crew and then the flower crew.

The Geranium Cowboy's only previous experience with plants came as a boy working with his mother in the family garden, an activity he always enjoyed.

Although he complains about the pay, he seems content at the University greenhouse. He augments his income by officiating high school basketball and slo-pitch softball games in the northern suburbs.

Wendland says he has no special methods to succeed with plants.

"No, I don't think I have a green thumb," he says, looking at his soiled hands. "A dirty thumb, maybe, but not a green thumb. That's my success."

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