



PHOTO COURTESY OF VIETTE FAMILY

Martin Viette in 1968 at the East Norwich nursery that bears his name. Viette arrived in New York from Switzerland in 1920 with dreams of singing opera.

Where a family bloomed

For 80 years, a nursery bearing Martin Viette's name has existed on Long Island



**IRENE
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Herbs and heirloom vegetable seedlings fill flats and promise healthy harvests. Roses and rudbeckia and purple coneflowers and coreopsis reflect sunshine in the perennial yard. Hostas and hellebores and heucheras have it made in the shade of a roofed refuge.

In the outside sections, the know-it-alls and the know-nothings and the great majority in between look at shrubs and statuary and stone benches and planters and fountains. Inside, orchids and African violets and other houseplants hold court. Elsewhere there are pruners and shovels and mailboxes and a model conservatory.

"We're a full-service garden center," sums up Michael Ireland, who runs Martin Viette

Nurseries in East Norwich with his brother, Russell III. The Ireland family has owned and run the place for 32 years. Before them, there were the Viettes.

Yes, there really was a Martin Viette. And this season marks the 80th year that a nursery bearing his name has been in operation on Long Island. And therein, as they say, lies a story.

At the start

It's a story of families and flowers and fathers and sons. It starts with Martin, who died in 1979. And so I travel to Virginia to talk to his son, Andre, who followed his father down the garden path — running the nursery and becoming a perennial plant expert, radio personality and internationally known daylily hybridizer. Before we go any further, I should admit that I'm a fan of Andre's daylilies and have several in my own yard — pale yellow *Fragrant Light* and dark purple *Black Friar* and icy pink *Viette's Shenandoah Bisque*.

Andre smiles as he shows me

a photo of his father — a tanned man in a checked shirt standing in a field surrounded by pink poppies of his own creation.

He tells me that Martin came to America from Switzerland in 1920 — a 16-year-old émigré with no English. He came with dreams of becoming an opera singer, but instead, he found a job as an apprentice gardener on a Gold Coast estate and made nurturing the earth his song.

"He had a big voice," Andre says. "He was a small man — about five-four-and-a-half. He had a barrel chest and when he sang, you'd swear the glasses would break."

I study the photo and wonder if Martin ever sang to his plants. In his obituary, his sister-in-law recalled a June day in the 1950s when she saw him among his peonies. In those days, nursery owners grew their flowers in their fields instead of in plastic containers. Martin had just received an order from a customer, but he wasn't using his shovel.

"He couldn't stand to dig his own peonies," his sister-in-law was quoted as saying. "He couldn't stand to see a hole in his field."

His son is no different. Andre Viette, now in his 70s, maintains a nursery in the rolling countryside of Fishersville, Va., with his son, Mark, who is a garden expert and TV personality in his own right. There are more than 100 varieties of peonies in Andre's display beds, but he wouldn't dream of digging them up. "Oh no," he tells me. "These are to be admired — not dug up for sale. We have production fields for that. I planted these peonies — like the irises and the daylilies and everything else in the garden — to inspire people."

I'm in Fishersville not just to fill out the Martin Viette story but because I've always wanted to meet Andre and see his flowers and learn a little along the way. As we talk, we're looking at a large bed of irises in a rainbow of colors that unfolds along a winding road bordered by farmland dotted with grazing cows



PHOTO BY IRENE VIRAG

Martin Viette's son, Andre Viette, shows some of the irises he has tended lovingly in a field at the Andre Viette Farm & Nursery in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

and the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. The irises are blooming and I drink in lavender Later Still and yellow Corn Harvest and apricot Mandolin and powder blue Victoria Falls.

"Just look at that color," Andre says, beaming at the almost translucent wonder of Victoria Falls. His smile is lovely and I can see the little boy who was hybridizing daylilies when he was 5 years old. And it is easy to imagine his father saying the same thing.

I also see an Oriental poppy that makes me feel better about the world — the poppy in the photo, pink Cedar Hill, one of the first poppies Martin created. He named it for the Brookville estate of the late and

famous lilac hybridizer Theodore Havemeyer, where Martin found his calling.

"An uncle who worked at another estate got him a job there," Andre says. "My father loved it. He had an amazing work ethic and a great memory — he could look at 32 different varieties of phlox and tell you their names. He created *Phlox paniculata* Katherine, which to this day is still one of best blue phlox on the market."

Really growing

Martin went out on his own in 1928 or 1929 — "who knows for sure," Andre says — on just two acres in Syosset. In the years that followed, he moved to a 20-acre site not far away

and then to a larger place in Plainview. Finally, in the mid-1950s, Martin Viette Nurseries came to the 42-acre property where it still stands.

And as the suburbs boomed, Martin Viette Nurseries was in place to serve the new landowners whose Cape Cods and split levels and ranches sprung up on potato fields and whose horticultural aspirations started with lawns and ended with tomatoes in the vegetable beds and impatiens in the flower borders.

Years before plants were grown and sold in plastic containers, the nursery consisted of flower fields and an outdoor sales area. The Viettes dug up the plants and sold them in boxes. Martin, who introduced the Japa-

Voice of experience

Andre Viette lectures at 1 p.m. Saturday at the East Norwich nursery that bears his father's name, Martin Viette. He'll talk about perennials and give gardening tips. Reservations are required; call 516-922-5530. Visit Andre's Web site — www.inthegardenradio.com.

nese painted fern to the United States, was one of the nation's first commercial perennial growers. Later, Long Islanders like the late Jim Cross and Lois Woodhull, who would specialize in perennials, came to his son for advice.

In 1962, Martin suffered a heart attack. "He never really worked again," Andre says. His father retired — spending much of his time in a hilltop retreat in St. Thomas, where he planted banks of bougainvillea and an orchard of citrus trees and introduced the first Norfolk pine to the island. He died in 1979.

Andre's wife, Claire, also comes from a Long Island nursery family and they knew each other as children. She is petite and bright-eyed and worries about him going out in the rain without an umbrella. They took over the nursery in the 1960s and built the garden center as well as a home on the property. They raised flowers and two sons and twin daughters and now they have 10 grandchildren.

Goodbye to Long Island

Three years before Martin's death, the Viettes sold their nursery. They moved to a 210-acre farm in Virginia because they were worried about drugs in the schools and rising taxes and what they saw as an erosion of family values.

"My father loved it here," Andre says as he surveys the 25-acre woods and the large pond and the rolling greenery and the display beds in Virginia. "It reminded him of Switzerland."

It's raining, but that doesn't dampen Andre's joy. He gives me an umbrella but goes bareheaded as we tour the place he named Andre Viette Farm & Nursery. "A lot of people don't see the beauty around them, but my father certainly did."

Andre pauses, still thinking

about his father. "I think the hardest part of leaving Long Island and the business there was selling his name."

It helped that the new owners were nursery people — Russell Jr. and Emily Ireland. Russell Sr. — now in his 90s and retired in Key Largo, Fla. — owned a nursery in Oceanside that his son and daughter-in-law took over. Eventually, they wanted a place on the North Shore, and Martin Viette Nurseries was for sale. The timing was right.

"One of the big changes my parents made was to go full-force into growing in containers," Michael says when I talk to the brothers in their office above the sales floor. "And like my grandparents, my parents worked together — and they built something to last."

The Irelands moved into the Viette's Dutch Colonial house and 11-year-old Russell III and 9-year-old Michael loved it. "The nursery was our playground," Michael tells me. "We pulled weeds and watered, but we had no interest in the family business. We were encouraged to find our own paths."

So they did. Michael became a corporate banker. Russ worked as a steelworker and owned a Lawn Doctor franchise for a while. But both finally claimed their heritage.

"We started at the bottom," said Russ, the 43-year-old father of three daughters. "We filled out job applications and went for interviews. My father said, 'Grab a hoe and a hat, put some sunscreen on and get to work.' It's still that way — when there's a hole we fill it, we unload trucks, make deliveries, sign checks."

Emily Ireland died 10 years ago, and Russ Jr. is 65 and hasn't been active in the business in recent years. "He looks around now and then," says Mike, who is 40 and has a young son and daughter. "He tells everyone they're doing a good job."

Today, the business includes wholesale and retail operations, a 45-acre field in Jamesport where woody plants are grown and a landscape-design branch named Ireland-Gannon. About 60 to 65 percent of the yearly business involves selling plants, for instance, as many as 35,000 flats of annuals; 15,000 hanging baskets; 6,000 rose bushes; and close to 10,000 daylilies.

When the Ireland brothers came to the nursery as kids, flowers grew in the front fields along Route 25A — rivers of peonies and poppies and irises and daylilies. But drainage issues washed away the tradition. The problems have been resolved and just last week, 150 pounds of seeds were sown to create a 10-acre wildflower meadow.

On Saturday, Andre and Claire Viette will drive along the newly seeded meadow into the nursery that still bears his father's name. Andre will lecture on gardening and see old friends and meet new ones and celebrate a milestone with the Irelands — the 80th year that Martin Viette Nurseries has been in operation on Long Island.



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BILL DAVIS

Michael and Russ Ireland, above, seen with Russ' dog, Lucy, run Martin Viette Nurseries. Right, the nursery entrance

