

Hanging planters a good sign

Colorful baskets give cities some identity, attract people downtown

By Dean Narciso and Elizabeth Gibson

The colorful cascade of vinca and geraniums in moss-lined buckets appears each spring, as if by magic, in downtown Worthington.

The 56-pound baskets, unwatered, are a harbinger of summer, their arrival choreographed by city grounds supervisor Mark Jans inside a warehouse on Highland Avenue.

Plants line the floor. Spades, forks and awls — for poking holes in the baskets — lie on tables. Workers wear rubber gloves in the 20-minute-per-basket assembly line.

In each of the past 15 years Jans has tinkered with the floral chemistry, hoping to find the ultimate ratio of potting mix, soil additives and water.

This year, adding white granules called endomycorrhizal fungi, Jans said he's come close to perfection.

The fungus forces the roots to grow faster, important in the early days of planting, especially over a long Memorial Day weekend.

More than 100 of the planters were hung yesterday.

"We're not here to water Saturday or Sunday," he said. "If they don't get water, there's going to be a mad rush to water for the (Memorial Day) parade."

City worker Patrick Pugh studies popular culture at Bowling Green State University during the school year. In the summer, he maintains the baskets.

"People always tell me how good they look and how do we take care of them."

The city created a "Hanging Basket Informational Guide" to share those secrets

The baskets, also popular in other cities, help define a

community.

"It's what makes Worthington Worthington," said Janes.

Westerville hangs about 100 pre-made baskets, which cost \$34.75 apiece.

The flowers include wave petunias that dangle over the side of the baskets, producing a waterfall of blooms by summer.

"That little enhancement just makes it pop," added Doug Vineyard, arts and facilities supervisor for the city's parks department. "It's become kind of part of our identity. Other towns and cities will ask us how we do it."

In Marysville, adults with developmental disabilities help with the watering.

They're paid by the chamber of commerce, said Cedi Siler, a program specialist at WorkNet, a unit of the Union County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

New Albany plans to install flower baskets in the village center for the first time this year, at a cost of \$6,100.

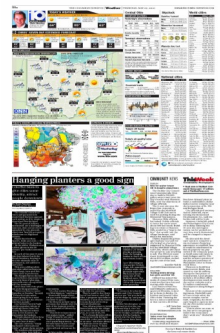
"It's a beautification effort. Flowers can help bring so much life, color and vibrancy to an area," said New Albany spokesman Scott McAfee.

Without them, "I think you'd see a bare downtown," said Worthington Maintenance Superintendent Tom

Gilkey.

"It seems to be what the people and (City Council) want to see. You put those up and the flags up, and people go downtown and spend money."

Before Worthington voters approved an income-tax increase May 4, the City Council toiled over ways to cut the budget, including the flowers. But the baskets, which cost the city about \$11,000 a year, have been spared.





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ABOVE: Westerville resident Lee Helzer plucks a petunia from the hanging basket in front of her State Street home.

LEFT: Worthington city worker Patrick Pugh, left, assembles a basket while city grounds supervisor Mark Jans hauls away one of the finished ones. The city hung more than 100 in the downtown area yesterday.