

# Pansy Seed Worth Weight in Gold

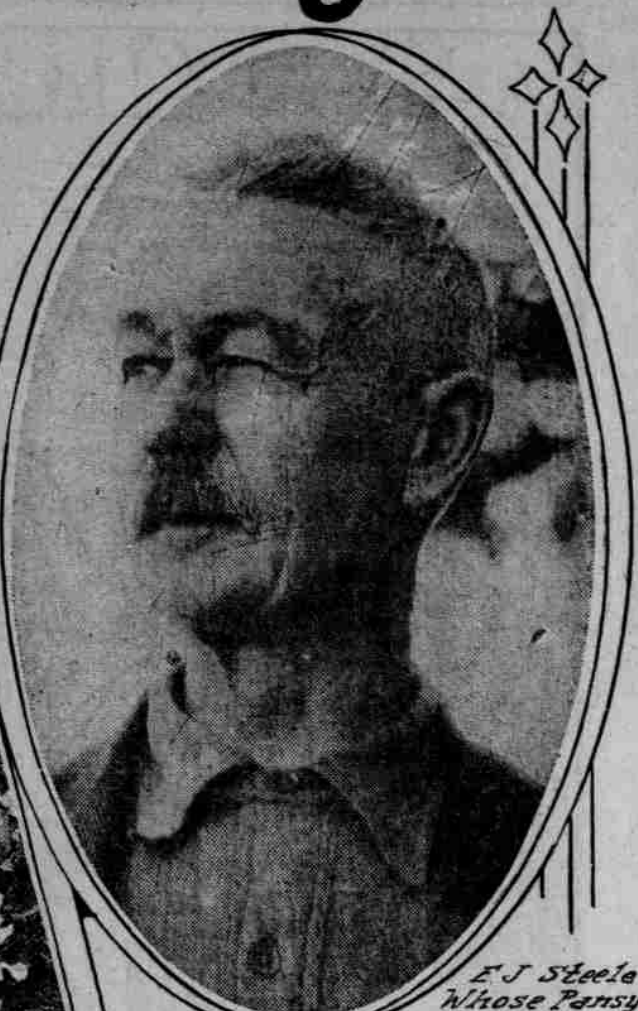
Largest Farm of Its Kind in World  
Yields Enormous Profits



Selected Plants—One out of 20 or More Survives.



Field Scene—Mixed Seed Pansies



E. J. Steele  
Whose Pansy  
Mine Outdoes  
Gold For Profits

BY DEWITT HARRY.  
MEN have fought, have suffered, have betrayed friends, have undergone untold hardship, have perished in the pursuit of gold worth but \$20 an ounce and all unawares have made a fool of themselves that lay close to their homes. It seems a far cry from gold to pansies, but pansy seed is worth from \$30 to \$50 an ounce, more valuable than gold. Why not dare all to gather pansy seed.

How many acres of placer ground will yield \$5000 net a year, year in and year out? Not many, possibly, even in the best of ground, for gold is exhaustible. Yet within Portland's city limits is a pansy farm that pays its owner \$5000 and more a year net, and he farms six acres. His seed cleanup on each acre averages about 16 pounds each year, and this 16 pounds of seed sells for \$3000. The remainder of his income comes from marketing the blooming plants, volunteer seedlings and seedlings. It is a revelation in the floral cultural possibilities of this climate. The nearly uniform history of the flower farms of this vicinity seems to be that they bring in fortunes for their owners, providing the owners have some intelligent idea of their profession. Yet none of our colleagues seem as yet to have awakened to the possibilities that flowers offer to the farmer and confine their instruction courses to potatoes, wheat or chickens and like subjects. How many vegetable or stock or grain raisers can point to such a record as that of E. J. Steele of this city.

Out on Powell Valley road is the Steele pansy garden, known the world over. Since 1893 Steele has been growing pansies, his start coming from a tiny bed four feet square that he had in his front yard. From this humble beginning, and without any knowledge of the flower-growing business, has developed the most astounding specialty in the floral world, for the Steele products are unquestionably the peer of any grown the world over, and Portland pansies are known all over the globe. More Steele pansies are sold in New York than on the entire Pacific coast. Los Angeles uses more Portland pansies than any other city its size in America. Shipments go from Portland to London, Western Australia, the upper Yukon, Mexico, West Indies, South America, Africa, every country in Europe, the Isles of the Pacific, every state in the Union and every province in Canada. In one recent issue of the leading floral trade journal were 34 advertisements of seed dealers, 19 of these handling Steele's seeds and 15 of them advertising the fact. Pick up any florist catalogue and this fact will be verified.

Steele, a teacher, came to Portland from North Dakota in 1891, and afterwards served as principal of a number of city schools. He originally came from Wisconsin and, prior to his residence in Oregon, had done nothing but instruct. He did not know anything about farming or raising flowers. None of his family had ever been tillers of the soil, to his knowledge. Yet this man, knowing nothing of the work he was to make his real object in life when he came to Portland, is now the leading pansy grower in the world, and he has no one to thank for it but himself, for he mastered his profession by his own efforts. He never dreamed that flowers would prove his pit of gold, or that the rainbow hue of the pansy would reveal his fortune. It is one of the most striking proofs of Oregon's possibilities as a producing state, for it seems that nearly all varieties of flowers do exceptionally well here. Not only is the pansy of paramount importance, but the rose, dahlia, aster, tulip and numberless other beauties of this kind are paying enormous dividends to those who undertake their culture.

Steele's system is based on the theory of the survival of the fittest, that healthy and thrifty parents will hand down a heritage of beauty and strength. His selective practice, whereby he will destroy 50 plants to produce one of his high standard, is easier done with plants than with animals. This year he has in excess of a million plants on his farm, and every day he goes over them carefully and thins out the weaklings or poor specimens. All culls are destroyed. It is the largest exclusive pansy industry in America and no other pansy farms outside of Portland are known that cover more than an acre of ground. But let's allow Mr. Steele to tell us



A New Type This Year—Miracle Mixed.

how he achieved his present success:

"I believe that I have the most profitable little farm in the world. I am sorry to say that, although my books will show the amount of net cash received, they do not show all expenditures, but the little farm is an open field with no glass or other overhead expense to stimulate growth of crop and, after allowing \$1000 per acre for growing, harvesting and marketing the crop, the net income averages over \$5000 per acre.

"At about the time of life when the hour is at hand after which, psychologists tell us, that we cannot get a new idea, I came to the far west with total resources limited to \$6.50. I had held an elective office of an educational nature for three successive terms in the middle west and came here more for the purpose of escaping my political friends than anything else. I had plenty of them and that was why I had no money. Here I met with some hard luck, followed by a little spurt of success, and then I was married. The panic of '93 came along and I lost everything I had except my wife, the baby and my hat. But I had ten acres of wild land out toward the foothills and, in a true spirit of friendship, a real estate acquaintance of mine found a man who owned a house and a small lot far out beyond the city limits, with a big mortgage on it and two years' delinquent taxes and interest in the bargain, and I traded the ten acres for his equity 'out of sight and unseen.'

"It was early summer time, and in the rear of the house was a fine garden and in the front was a beautiful bed of flowers. The garden of flowers looked good to me. I played no favorites in the garden, front or rear. Everything received equal care and cultivation, but the flowers outdistanced everything in the garden.

"Soon after acquiring this safe port in a storm I was fortunate or unfortunate enough to secure a position in the public schools. When the following spring came, and the prospect of a visit from the sheriff seemed a little more remote, I decided to enlarge my flower garden and to secure some better flowers, if possible. I saved the seeds from the finest types and purchased the finest I could find—a very few, but they were good ones. In my quest I became acquainted with a man who was a cemetery superintendent with a man who was a lover of these flowers and who possessed the skill and knowledge necessary to grow them with a marvelous degree of success.

"Perhaps it is proper at this time for me to say that I had many things to learn about my specialty and my business as it developed. I read many books, reports and bulletins, but practically all of the most valuable information I have needed has been furnished by those who were well trained and successful business men and specialists in my line, all of whom

seemed to be delighted to have me give them an opportunity to do so.

"It is true there are many problems I have yet to solve: plant-breeding mysteries I call them. For example, one year a monster bloom of marvelous beauty appeared in the garden. I immediately isolated the plant. During the summer I bore one pod of seed. This I sowed, and I raised nine plants, all different, and only one that resembled the mother plant. A very large measure of my financial success is owing to the fact that I adopted a very unique and catchy name for my stock which is descriptive of the most valuable characteristic of the flower. This name is often advertised by seedsmen and, obviously, without my name.

"Early in my experience as a cultivator of pansies I discovered that I was up against a very expensive fad. The seed of ordinary varieties could be purchased for as little as a dollar an ounce, but the finest sold as high as from \$30 to \$50 per ounce, as they do yet. I bought several dollars worth of seed direct from a celebrated European grower, and soothed my wife and my conscience with a promise to sell enough plants the following spring to make good the alarming deficiency. I kept my promise and sold plants to the amount of \$4.35, which left me a small balance for a conscience fund and a nucleus of another buying venture in fancy seed.

"During the second year I grew some much finer plants and flowers. What interested me most was the fact that from the seed I had saved, I had some very promising types, some of them distinct variations from the parent plants, a few decidedly better and some as good and quite a number worse. The latter I promptly destroyed, marketing only those that were good and keeping the very choicest only for seed. This has been my policy ever since.

"For two seasons my plants had sold for 25 cents per dozen. Deducting losses, about 20 per cent, and commission, 20 per cent, left me net 15 cents per dozen. On a commercial basis it meant selling at actual cost. I, therefore, notified the seed companies that the following year I would market all my plants in containers of my own, costing 3 cents each, one dozen blooming plants in each container, the purchaser to buy containers and all plants therein, or none at all, the price to be not less than 35 cents per dozen.

"In spite of the protests and predictions of failure, I carried out my plan, and it was a great success, and I am now selling outright, or upon consignment, and shipping thousands of these containers so packed every year and getting net prices of 35 cents to \$2 per dozen for my plants.

"At the opening of the third spring season I found myself the owner of 10,000 superb plants set in beds occupy-

A Steele Mastodon, The Miracle Pansy.

ing a vacant lot next to mine, the use of which a kind neighbor gave to me rent free, and some free advice going with it that I would do better to raise 'spuds' than to waste my time with 'posies.' I could see no possible way to sell more than one-tenth of them, so I went to a seed company and offered to sell the entire crop, delivered at the store, for an even \$100—1 cent apiece. 'Nothing doing!' was the answer. I knew the manager of a box factory and he staked me with 100 boxes made to hold six to eight containers each. I securely boxed plants in full bloom, with the selling price of each container plainly marked thereon, and sent them express prepaid to 25 different cities and towns. With each shipment, or in advance, I mailed a circular letter to the express agent, and it informed the agent that plants were shipped on consignment, 20 per cent commission, container and contents to be sold at marked price intact, I taking all chances of any loss or damage that might occur, etc., and to sell same himself or turn shipment over to any responsible dealer in his town, the net proceeds, after deducting losses, if any, and the commission, to be sent to me.

"They sold like hot cakes; the losses were nominal, if any. I couldn't supply the demand, and I cleared nearly \$500 and established a demand that I have never been able to supply since. Incidentally I learned from the express companies that my method of marketing plants on consignment was absolutely unique and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it is so now. My product is not a necessity; on the contrary, it is a luxury, and yet I have never entertained an offer, nor have I accepted any price except my own. Why? Simply because my stock is highly superior—in fact it is strictly fancy in quality, and standardized and so graded that when a customer 2000 miles away takes my catalogue and orders five dozen plants at the price of \$5, he knows that he will get as good as he got last year, or better, for the same money. No labor or expense is spared in improving the stock and, if I received a double eagle for each plant, I couldn't make it a better one. It isn't the hope of more money that inspires me—not at all. It is the pride I take in doing well what I have to do.

"As the years went by the family within the home grew, and grew rapidly, and the family out in the garden increased so fast that the garden had to grow until it became a small field, and the garden family began housekeeping in the field. Local florists and market gardeners wanted to buy my seed. There were others in the neighboring towns who had seen my blooming plants and they wanted seedlings or seed. The

blooming plant season is a short spring season, but the demand for seed and seedlings in a vast region like America is continuous throughout the entire year.

"Now my business is a mail-order business. It takes a long time and some money to build it, but if your goods are first-class and your attention prompt, no one can deprive you of it, nor even keep it from growing rapidly. It is never hurt by local causes, such as overproduction, or financial depression, because somewhere else you will find shortness of supply and plenty of money.

"In view of all these circumstances it was up to me to put the business on a footing as soon as possible where it would not only sustain itself but a somewhat large and growing family. The development of the seed and seedling market thus insuring a steady income during the entire year was the only solution. As to the seed, I had to convince the grower that he could afford to pay me twice or three times as much for my strain as he would have to pay anyone else for his. I think you will believe me when I say that it was no easy job. But the seedlings—that was easy. For example, a grower in Denver needs 5000 plants to supply his spring trade. I can furnish him that number laid down at his door at a price below what he can possibly afford to grow them for himself, not considering our superior stock as any factor of value at all. This is easy because of our superior facilities for growing plants, and the growing of them on a gigantic scale.

"In all our advertising, including our color-plate catalogue, we placed in the spotlight the catchy name of my strain. Next in order was presented the idea that I had a specialty and that I confined my attentions exclusively to that specialty. Lastly, the superiority of our strain, and I was very particular to make it plain why it was superior. First, you must have a highly meritorious article. Second, get the why you have it into the minds of the people, and you have the key to the citadel of success in advertising.

"It is quite true, however, that anyone who thinks that a few dollars spent in advertising will get a return of a few twenties at once will be sadly disappointed. People will read your ads, but they won't tumble over themselves to send you their money. If you were a little mouse you would hear them say: 'Show me!' the first year the stock I sold from advertising barely paid for the ads. To make it perfectly plain, I didn't receive a cent for the stock and lost money paid for postage and express. Many are they who have advertised for a few weeks or months, or a year, and then quit the game just in time to lose their money.

"The second year I sold enough stock to pay for advertising, and to pay the cost of producing the stock. After five years my advertising accounts averaged about 12½ per cent. This includes circulars, catalogues, etc., at the present time. For the past two years we haven't been concerned about getting more orders, but we have been worried about getting too many.

"If the average farmer growing cereals put one-tenth of the work on his field that I do, it would be in a high state of efficiency for producing a crop. For example, in preparing a new field for fall crop, it was an old pasture. I plowed the ground May 1 and disked and cross-disked it 17 times; plowed it, harrowed it

three times and forked it over, before raking down the surface to make the beds. As I see it, too much pre-cultivation of land to be cropped is impossible. Too little preparation never makes a full crop and often results in total failure. I never allow a weed in field or fence corner to ever come anywhere near the seed-bearing period. A weed that reaches the age of two weeks on this farm would be a curiosity, I assure you. In fact, following my plan, you don't have any weeds. I do not consider weeds as a problem at all. They disappear with proper cultivation. Having blocked out the beds about five feet wide, I put on a liberal top dressing of manure for the twofold purpose of feeding the plants and protecting them from the cold winds of winter. The plants are set about five to the square foot. With the coming of early spring and the first blooms, the harvest begins. Of these five plants per square foot, the finest one is left for a seed plant; one is unfit and destroyed, leaving three for market.

"The lowest net wholesale catalogue price in lots of 1000 is 2 cents, and the highest price wholesale is 8 cents. At an average of 5 cents, and deducting 13,560 square feet for pathways, we have 30,000 square feet per acre net at 9 cents per seedling. This crop is disposed of before June 1. On the same acre I have remaining 30,000 seed plants which bear seed more or less continuously from June 1 to September 15. It is difficult to make a close estimate of the seed because we sow great quantities, and have not made a practice of keeping a record, but one crop, not counting the seed sown at all, yielded far more than 10 cents per plant, but allowing 10 cents per plant, I have \$3000 for seed. This seems to be some money for seed, but the average catalogue price of my seed is over \$12 per ounce. If you do a little bit of computing, you will find that it only takes 16 pounds of seed to be worth \$3000. Do I sell it? I certainly do.

"September 15 the seed plants are destroyed, the beds are raked down and mulched. All my seed is hand picked. I cannot save it all, and much of it falls on the ground. By October 1 I have hundreds of thousands of young seedlings in sight, which I call volunteers, and the following December they are the size of small cabbage plants and ready for market. A low average price for these is four for a cent. The average wholesale price of all American growers is above \$3 per 1000. One plant per square inch is allowable. One hundred per square foot gives excellent plants, but, allowing only 40 plants per square foot, I have 10 cents a square foot, or \$3000 more for a crop that cost me next to nothing. But of course I cannot do this every year. While an acre is yielding as above, there is another acre producing sweet peas or a garden crop, or a leguminous crop like vetches, to plow under, and in addition one big crop of seedlings which will bring fully \$4000, which, you will readily concede, if you know how thickly cabbage plants can be grown, and if you know the market price of young plants that bear any kind of flowers.

"Either as a vocation or as an avocation, I believe everyone should be a cultivator of the soil. But if you are a wage earner in a city, don't give up your job and hurry off to the country, thinking what a fortune awaits your initial efforts. Even though you have a well-grounded knowledge of the elements of agriculture, it will take you some time to establish yourself in your new occupation sufficiently well to make it pay one-half what you are now earning. If you want to find out what you can do, move out in the suburbs and lease an acre, more or less, hire a man to plow your ground, etc., and then put in your crop, grow it, harvest it and sell it, and see what your profits are. Meanwhile keep on drawing your salary. An hour or two each day of vigorous physical labor won't hurt you, and you will be better able to earn your daily wage than you would if you belonged to a bowling team or a hunt club. Many a night for years I worked with a big headlight lantern far into the night in my garden. When there was a rush of work I was out in the garden at daylight in the morning. Therefore, do not imagine that you 'haven't the time' to gain your independence in this way.