

About Horace Hagedorn

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Miracle-Gro, which produced the world's biggest cabbage, cantaloupe and dahlia, soon became as familiar a site in the American backyard as the station wagon in the carport. The gardening business is now estimated to exceed 35 billion in annual sales, and Miracle-Gro's share of the home fertilizer market is estimated to be 85 percent.

Mr. Hagedorn orchestrated the growth of his product like the marketing genius that he was. He hired a Norman Rockwell colleague to paint homey advertisements, and actor James Whitmore, whose gnarled face suggested a trustworthy farmer for television commercials. The 100,000 dollar prize he offered for a tomato of world record size was conditional on the use of a "certain" plant food.

The green and yellow package he commissioned became so famous that other companies, including AT&T and Hyundai, used it in ads for their products. Mr. Hagedorn charged them nothing as long as they spelled Miracle-Gro correctly.

"He was a huckster"; his son James said with cheerful affection. "One of those, like, carnival salesmen."

James also said his father was a sophisticated, hard-driving businessman. When the Scotts Company, the huge garden products concern, merged with Miracle-Gro in 1995, most news reports said Scotts was absorbing the smaller plant food company. A year later, Horace Hagedorn told the Wall Street Journal that he had acquired Scotts by insisting on an all-stock transaction.

The deal left the Hagedorns the largest shareholders with 43 percent of the company and 3 of the 11 board seats. Horace was vice chairman and James was president. James is now also chairman and chief executive.

"The truth of the matter is Scotts didn't buy Miracle-Gro," Horace said. "The truth of the matter is, we bought Scotts."

Tadd C. Seitz, the interim chief executive of Scotts at the time of the journal article, grudgingly acknowledged that the deal was far from a swallowing of Miracle-Gro. "More than perhaps people perceived in the beginning," he said.

Mr. Hagedorn, a multimillionaire, drove a Gremlin for many years and said he owned three suits and two pairs of shoes. He gave tens of millions to children's charities, and got special attention when he supported the education of 50 poor Brooklyn schoolchildren, with the goal of sending them to college. About 85 percent are going to college, and Mr. Hagedorn recently offered a sixth-grade class in Columbus, Ohio the same deal.

Horace Hagedorn was born on March 18th, 1915 in Manhattan, where his father was a Real Estate speculator. He earned a business degree from the University of Pennsylvania and began his working career selling advertising time on the radio. He then produced a radio drama, "The Big Story," a crime drama series.

He moved on to a small Manhattan advertising agency around the time he had a conversation with Martin Small, the

celebrated advertising man credited with inventing roll-on deodorant. Mr. Hagedorn said Mr. Small told him in five words, how to make a million dollars: "Find a need and fill it."

"I said Marvin, that's six words," Mr. Hagedorn said in an interview with The Washington Post in 2002, "And he said, 'So I lied a little.'"

One day in the mid-1940's, Otto Stern, a German-born nurseryman from Geneva, NY walked in the door in person and asked to buy advertising time on the radio program "Rambling With Gambling" on WOR-AM in New York, one of the top shows there for many years. Mr. Stern hated to use the telephone because his thick accent made it difficult for people to understand him.

Mr. Stern sold plants and trees by mail and they were arriving in pretty bad shape. Both he and Mr. Hagedorn hit upon the idea of fertilizer, and happened to read about the work of a Rutgers University professor, O. Wesley Davidson, an expert in raising Orchids. They hired him as a technical consultant to develop a water-soluble fertilizer.

The ingredients were not entirely mysterious, because sellers of fertilizers are required to list the percentages of nitrogen, phosphorus, potash and other trace elements. But the dry product, easy to ship and store, is mixed with water and the wetting agents and other ingredients are secrets.

"We were in the right place at the right time," Mr. Hagedorn said in an interview with The New York Times in 1993. He cited the rise in home building after World War II and a consequent demand for garden products. Also, Mr. Stern's mail order nursery business also had many eager customers.

Mr. Hagedorn's wife Peggy came up with the name Miracle-Gro, and the company was founded in 1950. The next year, Mr. Stern and Mr. Hagedorn each put in \$2000 to buy a full page advertisement in The New York Herald. The ad Mr. Hagedorn wrote was sprinkled with scientific phrases about things like radioactive isotopes and promised luxuriant plant growth. Within three days they had made ten times what the ad cost.

After four years, Miracle-gro's sales had passed \$500,000 annually, and Mr. Hagedorn decided to leave a successful advertising career to work full-time on Miracle-Gro. He bought out Mr. Stern in the mid 1980's, a couple of years before he died.

Mr. Hagedorn's strategy was to advertise on television, sell through the emerging new hardware store chains, and find a better way to apply the product than the original way of mixing a tablespoon of green granules with a gallon of water. His employees came up with a device to dispense the fertilizer through a garden hose.

Mr. Hagedorn did not veer from his own expertise, doing marketing and sales for Miracle-Gro and farming out manufacturing, packaging and distribution to smaller companies. He thus created what might be one of the first "Virtual Companies," that is, companies that exist to be successful brands, his son said.

When Mr. Hagedorn merged with Scotts, he had already given much of his stock to his children. He took the \$50 million he personally earned from the sale to set up a charitable trust. Among many gifts, most to children's causes, were contributions to Hofstra University's School of Education, which is now named for him, and to Adelphi University's business school, which also carries his name.

A little more than a year after his wife Peggy died in 1984, Mr. Hagedorn was looking at the personal ads in a local paper when he came across one placed by a woman who liked to read seed catalogs and sale, his other passion. He answered on Miracle-gro stationary, and he and Amelia Maiello, a pre-kindergarten teacher, were later married.

She survives him along with his sons James, Peter, Robert, and Paul; and his daughters, Susan and Kate; 22 grandchildren; and 5 great-grandchildren.

For all his success elsewhere and no matter how much Miracle-Gro he lavished, Mr. Hagedorn could never grow a tomato in his own garden that weighed more than three pounds. The world record is 7 pounds, 12 ounces.

NY Times Tuesday, February 1st 2005

Douglas Martin