

In the Company of Plantsmen[®]

Allen Bush

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Jelitto Perennial Seeds is a small seed company devoted to the breeding, production, and seed technology of perennials and ornamental grasses. We're committed gardeners, too. At the end of the work day most of us rush home to our gardens. The company employs 23 employees. Most work at headquarters in Schwarmstedt, Germany, in northern Germany. In addition, there are also marketing offices in North America (Louisville, Kentucky), United Kingdom (Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire), and Japan (Urayasu-shi, Chiba).

Jelitto lists over 3,000 different seed items in their 2009 catalog. Seventy percent is under our production in over 20 countries. The company has pioneered the patented GOLD NUGGET SEED[®] process that significantly reduces the germination time on over 300 taxa that might normally require extended moist-cold stratification. Jelitto Seed Technology JET[®] represents the company's improvement in seed cleaning. JET[®] seeds have been rubbed, peeled, or processed into pure seed for better mechanical handling and seed sowing. Some seeds are heated-treated to reduce disease vectors.

The company was founded by Klaus Jelitto in 1957. Klaus was raised in gardens and has a long, distinguished lineage in the seed business. His grandmother's family founded a forest seed company in 1788. His father Leo started the popular German professional gardeners magazine now known as "Deutscher Gartenbau." His father is probably best known throughout Europe and North America for co-authoring the two volume *Hardy Herbaceous Perennials* with Wilhelm Schacht. Prior to starting the company that bears his name, Klaus Jelitto worked in South Africa, Denmark, and Sweden. To his eternal credit, he married Margot who had trained in the seed business and worked together with Klaus until her retirement in 1992. (Margot Jelitto still holds the record for packing the most seed packets in a work day.)

Georg Uebelhart started with Jelitto in 1998 after a year's internship with Kurt Bluemel and is now a co-owner. He subsequently finished graduate work in his native Switzerland. He has been fascinated with mountain plants since he was a young boy. As a teenager, he printed a perennial seed catalogue promising to beat Jelitto's prices! He has traveled on plant hunting trips to China, Sikkim, Russia and Argentina and has a plantsman's eye. He can see plants 100 ft in the woods driving along rugged roads. His home garden is devoted to a wide assortment of rare and unusual perennials.

My colleagues Mary Vaananen and Richard Oliver are avid home gardeners. Mary Vaananen, prior to joining Jelitto in 2002, worked for Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, outside of Louisville, where she designed and planted a small rock garden that was breathtaking for its use of native stones and exotic alpiners. Richard Oliver, together with his wife Angela, have exhibited troughs of rock garden plants at the Chelsea Flower Show.

I am passionate about experimenting with new perennials and alpine species at my home in Louisville, Kentucky. If these endure the extremes of winter cold and

wet and the summer heat and humidity, there's a good chance they'll adapt to gardens over much of North America. Winters, even in our Zone 6 can be extreme. Several times in my lifetime, the winter thermometer has dipped to -20 °F (-29 °C) and summers can be hot and humid. The high summer nighttime temperatures in the 70s can be stifling to plant growth on many species.

Many of Jelitto's historic introductions, even before they made it to the company's trial grounds, passed muster at home. The success of perennials in our employee home gardens with wide-ranging climates is the best indicator of what might prove successful for gardeners at home — around the world.

Jelitto's award-winning plants include *Echinacea purpurea* 'Magnus', the 1988 recipient of the Perennial Plant Association's Plant of the Year and 2003 Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit; and *Penstemon Mexicale* hybrids 'Sunburst Amethyst' and *Heliopsis helianthoides* var. *scabra* 'Summer Nights' received the 2006 Diploma from the International Perennial Union (ISU). In 2008 *Delphinium elatum* 'Sweethearts' New Millennium Hybrids F₁ received the Royal Horticultural Society Award of Garden Merit; and the Diploma from the International Perennial Union (ISU) was awarded to *Delphinium* 'Dusky Maiden' New Millennium Hybrids F₁.