



Hark Orchids expects to be up and going this month in Comstock Township

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KALAMAZOO, MI – Hark Orchids expects to have its first U.S. orchid propagation facility up and going before the end of July at the Midlink Industrial Park in Comstock Township.

It expects to be able to ship young plantings from the new, \$6.5 million state-of-the-art propagation and cultivation facility to its primary customer, within about four months.

The company's primary customer in the U.S. is Green Circle Growers of Oberlin, Ohio.

"We're wrapping up construction and should be completed in mid-July," said David Gordon, general manager of Hark Orchids LP. "Our building and construction is about one month ahead of schedule and we're looking to start production, the initial operation, in early to mid-August."

Hark Orchid, also called Hark Orchideen, is a family-owned business based in Germany whose sales account for about 20 percent of the orchid market in the United States but about 90 percent of the orchid market in Europe.

Local leaders hope that if it prospers here, the 60 to 70 jobs it has promised by the end of 2014 could grow to many more in the area in coming years.

Excavation of a 1-acre site on the grounds of the 340-acres Midlink Business Park began in mid-September of 2012 and **construction began on Oct. 4 of 2012**. The Midlink Business Park is on Sprinkle Road, south of Interstate 94, in Comstock Township.

"We are working through the check-list on the facility construction," Gordon said of what is happening now, "and beginning to bring in production equipment and fixtures."

The science of orchids

In a community known for its agricultural production, including bedding plants, blueberries and celery, Hark Orchids production is a bit of new science, those familiar with orchids say. The 35,000-square-foot facility

that Hark is building in the Midlink Business Park is the evolution of a system developed by members of Fritz Hark's family. The company's chief executive officer is part of fourth generation of the family involved in the business.

Hark was founded in 1904 and is based in **Lippstadt, Germany**.

Orchids are hybrid flowers, whose breeding process requires genetic fusing -- building each seed one at a time. That is a strictly controlled process that takes two years and requires standardized work procedures.

It starts in a sterile laboratory with sterile growing medium and continues in climate-controlled clean environments before plants can be transferred to greenhouses where they are grown. Green Circle Growers is expected to buy, grow and wholesale the plants to major retailers.

Conditions need to be sterile at the outset to make sure diseases and insects are excluded and to ensure a certain level of quality, Gordon said.

Manual dexterity, keen eyesight, the ability to work with long-handled instruments such as forceps and scalpels, and the ability to detect the difference in growth patterns in plants, are skills the operation hopes to find in workers. Employees work at clean benches to manipulate cuttings from an original plant source (in Germany) to propagate orchids. They are required to use instruments to trim bulbs and do other delicate work.

"Plants are like humans" Gordon said. "They are all different. Their defects are all different and it takes a keen eye to recognize that."

Seeking new hires

Hiring is being done in phases, with 10 to 12 workers being schooled for two to three weeks.

The company expects to hire 30 people during its first year and the same number by the end of 2014. They are to be trained 10 to 12 workers at a time in two- to three-week phases by supervisory personnel from the company's home office in Germany.

Gordon said Michigan Works is doing well to supply workers able to handle the work.

"We've just started the recruitment process with the support of Michigan Works," Gordon said. "We have the candidates lined up for our initial group. Three ladies from Germany are going to come over to train and supervise during their ramp-up phase."

"We're a no smoking campus," Gordon said. Workers will not be allowed to wear fingernail polish or artificial finger nails. They will not be allowed to wear their nails beyond the tips of their fingers. No jewelry is allowed on the wrists and no wedding rings.

Those requirements are announced, Gordon said, "So people can self-select," and decide if this is a environment that suits them.

"We're in an industry that is not regulated by the U.D. Department of Agriculture or the U.S. Food and Drug Administration," he said. "We're self-regulated. So these are just practices that have been developed over the years from experience."

Those interested in applying for work may do so through Michigan Works, and should NOT contact the employer directly.

According Michigan Works!, individuals interested in applying should submit a resume and intake questionnaire at the Michigan Works! Service Center in Kalamazoo at 1601 S. Burdick St., or the Michigan Works! Service Center in Three Rivers at 16587 Enterprise Drive.

The jobs pay about \$10 per hour plus benefits. The initial work shift will run from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Details about the job can be found on Pure Michigan Talent Connect. The website is **MiTalent.org**.

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