

# Wind and ice destroy Rock Garden herb crop

By Georgia Caldwell

Courier Staff Writer

Charlie Coiner checked his greenhouses at the Rock Garden herb and flower farm on Sunday morning, February 25, at 2:30. The wind had been up, and he wanted to make sure that the plastic sheeting was still tight. Satisfied that things were shipshape, he went back to bed.

But when Elaine Allen went to the greenhouses on Rte. 340 in Gaylord at 7 a.m., she found icy havoc. Powerful winds had pulled the plastic sheeting loose. The steel lockdown strips that held the plastic to the concrete with screws had been pulled up by the force of the wind. The strips, still attached to the flapping plastic, had blown over to the north side of the greenhouse, and the steel had lacerated the plastic on a smaller greenhouse nearby.

But the worst sight was the plants. Rows and rows of herb seedlings, \$75,000 worth of cash crop, were almost totally destroyed. What had looked like an indoor field of sprouting green the day before was devastated.

Elaine awoke or called the Rock Garden workers with the deadly news.

"One hundred thousand baby herb and flower plants were involved. Horehound, purple ruffle basil, lavender, all of them used to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. And suddenly, it was zero," Coiner said last Friday.

The plastic piping that carried the water for misting and irrigation had burst, and stalactites of

ice hung from piping. They had buried their pointed ends in flats full of green rapidly turning to brown. The furnaces and electric heaters smelled like burning electricity. They were turned off at once.

Coiner is beginning to feel like Job in the Bible. "Only worse. My trials have been wind, flood, ice and drought."

In 1983, there was a flue fire in the glass greenhouse that he had in Jefferson County. The wooden structure burned, much of the glass broke, and smoke destroyed many plants.

The following year was a good one, but in 1985, the flooding Shenandoah rampaged through his seedling beds. Coiner thought that perhaps he was in the wrong place, and he bought the small farm in Gaylord previously owned by the Richardsons. The first year he was there, he lost a lot of plastic to a cold front, that time from the north. But the damage was not as serious as that the Rock Garden sustained on Feb. 25.

"We had a great year in 1987, but 1988 was a drought, and then we had last Sunday," said Coiner. "This place is a good idea, and I have good people working here, but right now, I'm down to nothing in the check book, and we won't have anything in for another three months, until the plants that we manage to save can be marketed. Many of the plants we lost were ready for sale in another week."

Coiner, his workers, and several neighbors who had heard

about the disaster, worked all day Sunday to move the plants that looked as if there might be some life in them to another greenhouse.

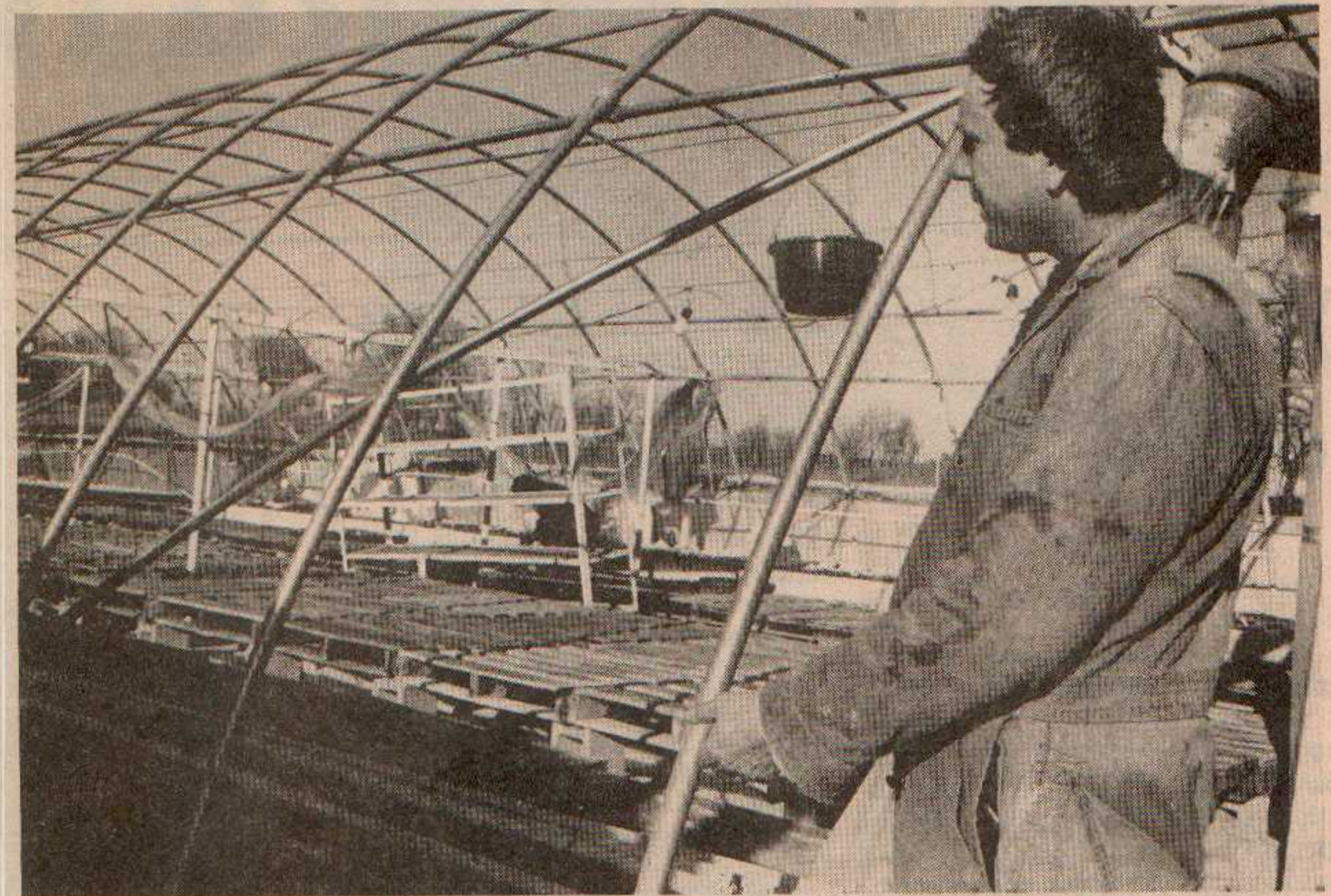
"It was the combination of some isolated gusts of high wind, and the temperature drop that did it," he said. "It's just the old agricultural gamble. If it had happened 5 days earlier, we could have dealt with it—the weather was mild then."

The financial beating Coiner took seems overwhelming.

"It's off to the bank once more, and more struggling like crazy. Just as it seems that we're about to have a strong year, this happens. I'm afraid that my banker and creditors are starting to associate the name Rock Garden with sequential disasters. My workers have stuck with me through the hard times, merchants let me pay when I could, but right now so many things are hanging in the balance: how much insurance will pay, if anything; whether the creditors and bankers will give me the chance to get over this one; and whether the workers and I have the psychological energy to keep going."

The Rock Garden employs eight people through the winter, and 20 people during the peak growing season for the outdoor beds.

"We're not a huge operation, but we employ a number of county people, and folks tell me that they love to drive by and see the beauty of our fields in the outdoor growing season. I feel like we make a contribution to the county, but I'm just not sure right now how things



Courier Staff Photo by Bonnie Jacobs

**FEELING LIKE JOB, Charlie Coiner surveys his devastated greenhouse. Almost nothing was saved when a blast of winter tore off the plastic cover on his herb crop.**

are going to continue. The fighter in me says, dum it, chomp down hard, tear into it, keep going. But the businessman says, wait a minute, can this keep happening?"

At the back of the greenhouse that was not destroyed, Kathy Bercier, Mary Payton, Darlene Miller and Elaine Allen took seedlings out of pots to see if the roots were still alive.

"I came here from Nebraska to work with Charlie," said Allen

"I saw him and his herb and flower wreaths on Pat Robertson's 700 Club, and I got in touch with him and asked if he needed help. I've been trying for a long time to find a way to make a living from my interest in herbs."

"We didn't really realize how bad it was until a few days after," said Bercier. "It's sort of like if you don't look, it didn't happen."

Payton said, "I've been working for Charlie three years, but I've lived up the hill all my life, and this is like home. It's like seeing your home all torn up."

The Rock Garden workers are

a team, and the women in the greenhouse said that they all do everything—the crafts, the greenhouse work, the fields.

"For a lot of Sunday, it was just us and Charlie, cleaning up and moving what we thought could be saved. We felt like Charlie's angels," Payton said.

For all the Rock Garden folks, the help and support of neighbors has meant a lot. Any Clarke County citizen who would like to lend a hand saving herb seedlings can call 955-3333 to volunteer. Charlie needs all the angels he can get.

For wildlife

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