

Marble King Diversifies Its Product Offering

By **PAT LAWRENCE**

For The State Journal

Perhaps it's the nature of the business, but **Beri Fox**, president and CEO of **Marble King**, likes to keep things moving.

One of only two marble manufacturers in the United States, Marble King in Paden City manufactures a million marbles each day. The company operates 24 hours a day, making marbles for toys and games, landscaping and garden design, the floral and jewelry industries and architectural use.



Fox

"Marbles are often used decoratively, but they also have industrial applications, like filtering systems," Fox said. "Or, rattle a can of spray paint, and that's a marble you hear inside."

Fox said a huge increase in architectural use of marbles in landscape and lighting design has offset a decline in the sale of games.

Marble King marbles come in 42 colors, eight sizes and a variety of styles, including clear, frosted and iridescent. Collectible favorites, such as cats-eyes and puries, come boxed, bagged or custom packaged for retail sale. Half marbles, called gems, are often used in patio stones, mosaics and stained glass. The company recently filled an order for 25 tons of marbles for an architectural project.

"That's about 7 million marbles," Fox

said. "It's just a week's production, but that's an especially large single order."

In 2000, Marble King received the Governor's Award for Excellence in Exporting. In 2004, despite stiff competition from Chinese manufacturers, Marble King again was recognized with the governor's award for successfully expanding exports to the Netherlands, Australia, India and South Africa.

"In the past two years, two competitors have closed their doors," Fox said. "We struggle to be competitive with the imports from China, but because of our quality and selection, we ship worldwide."

In 2002, Marble King enhanced its line with the purchase of **Peltier Gem and Marble Co.**, part of the parent company from which Marble King originally evolved.

The company employs 28 people in its 57,000-square-foot plant. As home to Marble King's five-acre manufacturing facility, Paden City was cited as the nation's "marble capital" in an October

feature of *USAToday*.

The company's European customers are urging Fox to open an office in France.

"Europeans like the best of everything, and Marble King has a reputation for the world's highest quality marbles," Fox said.

"They want to buy directly from the factory. Plus, our customer base in Europe wants us to have direct interaction with their market.

"The possibilities are intriguing. Just exploring the idea has been exciting," said Fox, although no decision has been made. "Manufacturing would remain in Paden City, but we would display and stock merchandise there and have direct distribution from that point."

Across the U.S., representatives of four major firms sell Marble King to retail, architectural and industrial customers. Locally, Fox has plans to add retail space and plant tours at the Paden City facility, founded by her namesake, **Berry Pink**, the successful salesman that established Marble King.

Her father, **Roger Howdyshell**, bought the firm in 1983, taking it to the industry forefront with the first American-made cat's eye marbles and a process of veneering marbles over a less expensive glass base. After Howdyshell died in 1991, his wife, **Jean**, ran the company until her death in 2003, when Fox took the reins.

Facing the same challenges as all West Virginia glass companies with the high cost of health insurance, workers' compensation and record natural gas costs, Fox said, "I feel very fortunate to be able to carry on the tradition begun by my father and others. We are looking into alternative fuel sources so we can remain competitive."

Marble King participates in the West Virginia **Industries of the Future** program, which she said provides unique opportunities with advanced technology and methods of energy conservation.

"But the support and commitment of our employees make our continued success possible."