

Plan Now For Profitable Flower Harvest

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff
HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) —
It's possible to sell \$20,000 to \$28,000 an acre by growing flowers, according to Thomas Ford, Fulton County extension agent.

At the State Horticultural Association held recently in Hershey, Ford offered pointers to growers on how to succeed in producing and marketing field-grown fresh flowers.

"The key is to grow stuff that is different," he said. "New combinations and colors attract customers. To find out what colors will sell, read current magazines to find out what colors are popular."

From past experience, Ford has found that almost anything colored blue and spike flowers are in demand.

"Dare to be different," he said. Oriental eggplant foliage had popular appeal for one grower. At the same time, Ford cautioned growers not to put too much ground into exotic plants.

Flower marketing is a growing business. In 1980, the Dutch said that the U.S. was the most underdeveloped market for flowers in the world. At that time, statistics showed that Hollanders annually purchased 103 stems per capita; Germany, 43 stems per capita; Great Britain, 29 stems per capita; and the U.S. market fell far behind.

In 1980, the Dutch spearheaded an aggressive campaign to sell garden and cut flowers to the U.S. They made inroads into enticing Americans to purchase more flowers. However, flower growers in America started their own aggressive campaign with the confidence that they could grow the same flowers that were being imported.

Strict quarantine laws also work to local growers' advantages. According to Ford, "From 30-40 percent of all imported Dutch flowers are destroyed because of sand contamination."

More and more Americans are purchasing cut flowers on a regular basis. To capitalize on this growing trend, Ford encouraged growers to be aggressive when approaching florists, supermarkets, and other outlets for flowers.

Ford encouraged small growers to look at unusual markets such as restaurants, garden centers, and tourism.

White tablecloth restaurants need bud vases filled.

Another marketing technique that is growing in popularity is pick-your-own-bouquets. To decrease the danger of customers trampling blooms, beds should be planted four feet wide and 200 feet in length for this type of operation.

This concept is also popular at farmers markets where customers can select blooms from containers

filled with flowers. Prices can be set by charging by the stem or by the bunch.

"The trend is that consumers want guarantees that flowers will last from seven to 10 days. They want no risk," Ford emphasized.

"No matter where you live—your product is fresher than those being shipped in from other countries," he said.

However, growers have learned the hard way that being fresher does not necessarily guarantee that flowers will last longer. Improper harvesting can ruin the most beautiful blooms.

"Quality is not negotiable," Ford stressed.

Irrigation and weed control must be maintained. When stems reach 8-10-inches, they need some type of support.

Ford said to harvest early each morning and transport to the water cooler as soon as possible. (Check Nellie Call's method in another feature in this section).

Water quality is important after the flowers are picked. Alkaline water reduces vase-life. Alkaline water can be acidified by adding citric acid. A pool pH kit can be used to check water alkaline levels.

Flowers do well in water with added sugar and citric acid. To prevent microbial growth, use an acidic solution and maintain temperatures of 33-38 degrees and relative humidity of 80 percent. Recut stems under water.

In preparing flowers for market, know the flowers. Some blooms must be shipped upright, such as snapdragons and most spike flowers. Stems will curl up if the flowers are transplanted on the side.

Ford said that the biggest mistake growers make is to think that they are going to make a lot of money from planting acres of flowers. Then they plant 10 acres in one or two varieties of flowers.



Herbs are used not only as seasonings but has delightful additions to flower arrangements.

Unfortunately, it's difficult to market acres of the same type of flowers. It's better to grow 12 to 15 varieties to sell in bunches or by the stem.

Potential growers must realize that flowers are labor intensive and should figure on spending 3-4 hours daily in picking flowers during the growing months.

Ford recommends starting by growing one-fourth acre of flowers. Investment is small for this type of operation. After a season or two, growers can reevaluate whether or not they want to expand the business.

To keep costs low, Ford recommends using plastic for a greenhouse. Although it's convenient to have a walk-in cooler, you can use a basement room with an oversized air conditioner. Check into government surplus sales for bargains in purchasing a cooler.

Soil testing is recommended. Generally soil should maintain fertility similar to that needed to grow vegetable crops.

For more information on flower growing, contact your county Penn State Extension or call Ford at the Fulton County Extension (717) 855-4111.



Wildflowers can be cultivated for the cut flower market.

Flower Fields Is Blooming Success

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ment with a greenhouse that will grow whatever she wants.

Call said that her background had well prepared her for her vocation. Although the family moved frequently, they followed a lifestyle of self-sufficient farming. "We were poor and often didn't have enough to eat. We learned to make food out of nothing and make do with whatever we had."

This concept has carried over into her business. Unlike many florists who think every bloom must be perfect in size and shape, she said, "I don't waste anything. I pick everything and sell it. People love it. They don't care if some of the blooms are undersized in a bouquet."

Her operation has been so successful that she sells all her flowers within 24 hours.

She sells basket arrangements to gift shops. The flowers in basket

arrangements are those that dry in the basket.

Call studied at New York State Agriculture College and Cornell University in New York.

Call admits to not liking to pamper flowers. This can be avoided by starting flowers properly to reduce labor and problems later on.

She lays black plastic and straw between rows and uses trickle irrigation to feed with nitrogen. She uses lots of mulch and rotted manure, and sprays with Roundup herbicide.

Call purchased an used walk-in cooler for \$700. She recommends that growers who want to purchase coolers consider used ones, which are often ideal for flowers although they may not maintain even enough temperatures for food.

Since she began her business, Call has doubled the barn size and is in need of doing so again.

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HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) —
Nancy Linvill Dole flicked through slides of colorful dried flowers at the State Horticultural Association annual meeting held recently. While this isn't the season to dry flowers, it is not too early for growers to be plotting plans for planting, harvesting, and marketing.

Dole showed how Linvilla Orchards, Inc. in Media used dried flowers to their marketing advantage.

The orchard got its start in dried flowers 25 years ago when asked to decorate for a downtown hotel. The hotel was so pleased they asked them to decorate for a harvest show. The show was so successful that Linvilla capitalized on it. The harvest show now draws thousands who participate in hay rides, in picking their own pumpkins, and other fall-related activities.

Dole showed that simple touches such as twining bittersweet and dried leaves with apples can make a stunning display.

At first Linvilla gathered dried flowers and weeds from the hedge rows and fields to sell. They preserved beech leaves by dipping into a glycerine solution.

Linvilla dubbed the spot set aside for marketing the dried

materials the Weed, Pod, and Posey Shop.

But the demand grew, and plants could not be harvested haphazardly from fence rows. For a while the orchard tried growing flowers for drying. But the time consuming adventure proved costlier than importing flowers from Australia, Africa and other countries.

Linvilla changed the name of the section that displays the dried flowers to Hayloft Gift Shop, reflecting the change in marketing strategy to display the flowers with gift items.

The most important factor in marketing dried flowers, she said, is "display, display, display."

It may be as simple as a bunch of baby's breath in a crock or an elaborate arrangement of imported flowers, but the area must be eye-catching. Unusual blooms add interest and focal points.

Old tables, cupboards, wagon wheels, wooden wheel barrows and an old window frame are incorporated into displays.

Dole uses yards of fabric to cover tables and boxes on which to set arrangements. The fabric adds color and texture that compliment the arrangements. The fabric also can be used to cover boxes on which to build a multilevel display.

Dried Flowers Not A Dying Business

In addition, ribbon in all varieties, textures, and patterns are sold.

Linvilla has found it profitable to offer classes by taking one flower arrangement and providing all the materials and instructions to duplicate the arrangement. While they offer both morning and evening classes, the evening classes are by far the most popular.

Special events are held throughout the year that capitalize on showcasing the dried flower department. One of these events is a craft show. Crafters are carefully selected with no dealers allowed. Space is sold. At first, Linvilla feared that the craft show might take away from their own market, but they have found it works the opposite.

"Some stands sell dried flowers, but the show attracts a lot of crafters who will buy raw materials from Linvilla for their projects," Dole said. "There is enough business to share. Sharing is good," she said.

Press releases about upcoming events draw thousands of customers. Linvilla asks for local fire company volunteers to provide parking services.

In Pennsylvania, a climate controlled drying room is a necessity. Because light fades dried materials, the displays must be protected.