

Is Your Farming Operation Cut Out For Cut-Flower Production?

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Producing cut flowers as a specialty crop can be a lucrative move for some farmers, but a Penn State Cooperative Extension agent said producers should be aware of the requirements for making the crop profitable.

"Increasing demand has made fresh cut flowers a growing market, but producing this crop is not for everyone," said

Steve Bogash, horticultural extension agent in Blair County. "Flowers have special production methods, a short shelf life and a short field growth and marketing season in Pennsylvania."

Bogash said Pennsylvania growers can have a competitive advantage over foreign suppliers because of Pennsylvania's proximity to major eastern population centers. "Local growers can provide a 48-hour freshness ad-

vantage that can be a real marketing tool in a business where shelf life is so important," Bogash said.

"Farmers first should consider how to market their flowers," said Robert Berghage, assistant professor of horticulture in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. "Cut flowers usually are sold by the bunch, in arranged bouquets or individually. Producers should research a marketing method that works for them."

Berghage lists several marketing alternatives.

- **Wholesale.** Wholesale distributors buy and resell flowers for a predetermined price. Prices vary by region and can be subject to large fluctuations in the market.

- **Florists.** Marketing surveys have shown that many florists are willing to buy locally grown flowers. "They will expect the same high quality and service they receive from their other suppliers," Berghage said.

- **Pick-your-own,** roadside markets, and farm markets. These markets provide higher prices per unit, but overhead costs such as advertising, facilities, and maintenance usually are borne by the producer.

Bogash also points out that producers should consider the following:

- **Site.** The site should be well-drained and have deep, fertile soil. "Raised beds with plastic mulch will give the best results and keep weeds down," Bogash said. "With raised beds, the sun can heat from the sides as well as the top, and the mounded soil

improves drainage.

- **Planting.** Cut flowers are grown from transplants or plugs, Bogash explained. New growers, or those with small plots, can plant by hand, but mechanical planters will speed up the process. "Plant spacings will vary according to the species or cultivar," he said.

- **Irrigation.** A drip irrigation tape should be used for efficiency, to keep water off leaves and flowers and allow for easier fertilizer applications delivered by irrigation water.

- **Wind protection and support.** Cut flowers are easily damaged by winds. Producers can use live plants or fencing for windbreaks. Some flower species also require support. Bogash recommends plastic mesh products that provide a grid of support to encourage upright growth.

- **Pest Control.** Cut flower plants attract a wide range of pests. "Keep careful records and scout your plants often to discover pests early," Bogash said.

Insects that can be a problem in flower plots include aphids, thrips, spider mites, leafhoppers, beetles and caterpillars. "They often can be controlled by natural parasites and predators, which can be bought from biological control companies or maintained as on-site populations through careful management," Bogash said.

Natural sprays can be used, such as insecticidal soaps, horticultural oils, and extracts of neem oil. "You may have to use synthetic chemical sprays, but to protect beneficial insects, be sure

to avoid sprays with a long residual life," Bogash said. "If you must use synthetic sprays, use products that are specifically suited to your needs and have the lowest toxicity for bees."

- **Diseases.** Fungal diseases such as botrytis, powdery mildew, damping off, leaf spots, and several viruses are a major problem for cut flowers. "Most fungal diseases do not kill the flowers, but they can drastically reduce salability and mar appearance," said Berghage. "Good crop rotation, effective weed and pest control, and careful selection of plantings will help rein in diseases."

- **Weeds.** Bogash said plastic mulches can be used for weed control. Using cereal rye as a cover crop helps build the soil, smother weeds through competition, and act as a natural herbicide on many weeds. "Only a handful of herbicides are labeled for flower production," Bogash explained. "Some products control grasses, but very few control broadleaf weeds. Whatever you use, read the product label carefully."

- **Harvest.** Flowers should be harvested in the morning just after the dew has dried. Remove dead leaves and spent flowers to prevent botrytis from infecting future crops.

"Flowers should be placed in water as quickly as possible after cutting," Bogash said. "They should be cooled rapidly to prevent water loss and aging."

"You should know the blooming habits and bloom life of each flower in your plot, so customers will get long-lasting flowers."

Forage Soybean Seed Production Successful

HALL, N.Y.—Seedway confirms seed production of the new Donegal forage soybean was successful in 1999. Seed supply was tight last year because of limited seed increase.

The successful 1999 commercial seed crop is expected to make Donegal available for general use in 2000.

The company notes interest in Donegal is developing in many parts of the U.S., Canada, and some international forage production areas as more is known of the special forage traits. This trend is expected to stress seed supplies. Growers who want to plant Donegal in bag quantities should make arrangements early.

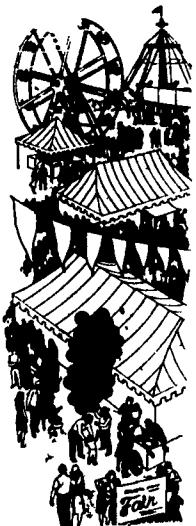
Donegal was licensed exclusively by Seedway from the USDA-Agricultural Research Service, Beltsville, Md. The for-

age soybean has been performing well in straight stands and forage mixtures in the Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, Midwest, and eastern Canada.

Interest in Donegal stems from high forage yield potential, good forage quality, compatibility in mixtures, and as a productive annual rotation option.

Single-cut yield of Donegal will usually compare with three-cut alfalfa yield at a given location. Herbicide-free forage production is an added benefit. A conventional breeding history without transgenic alteration is noted (non-GMO).

High biomass yield and substantial nitrogen contribution make Donegal particularly interesting in organic farming and other operations where improvement of soil tilth and fertility is valued.



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