

Cut Flower Growers Gear Up For Spring Plantings

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HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.) — "I've been coming since 1950, and I figure I still get at least one good thing from each class," said Paul Harner.

Although 87 years old, Harner continues to plant and care for 3,000 perennials at Harner Farm, State College.

He and many other participants at last week's Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention voiced their enthusiasm for the in-depth seminars offered during the three-day event.

"The hardest part is deciding which seminars to attend," a participant said of the hundreds of courses and activities on the schedule.

"As good as the classes are, we also learn so much from each other," Kathy King said of the impromptu conversations with other growers during mealtimes.

During a lunchtime break, King conversed with other cut-flower growers, including Morgan Maskewitz of Flinthill Flower Farm in Buckeystown, Md.; Bob Ambrose of Ridgeview Acres Farm, Stahlstown; Steward Mathias of Honey Crest Farm, Hummelstown; and a few others who came and went at the table.

"You can either learn the hard way or the accelerated way," King said of the benefit of the annual convention.

All growers have some devastating circumstances that forced them to learn things the hard way, but most mistakes can be avoided if you listen to the experience of other growers, Maskewitz said.

"One of the growers said that he raised two acres of flowers, but had no place to market them when in full bloom.

"If you have a perishable item, you'd better have a market," King said. She helps her husband Art and his brother Larry on their Harvest Valley Farms in Valencia.

Primarily a vegetable farm, the Kings are finding a rapidly expanding market in fresh cut flowers, which opens up a whole new venue. Customers want flower arrangements.

"I need to take a good flower arrangement course," King said.

Maskewitz never took a flower arranging course, but he's considered an expert in arrangements. He said that for years, he has been growing flowers, which he markets in the Washington D.C. area.

In recent years, he started arranging flowers because 75 percent of the customers want to buy flowers already arranged compared to about 20 percent who want to make their own arrangements.

Trained as an architect and in art, the background has helped him develop an eye for flower arrangement.

"It's called value-added, but you wouldn't believe, the problem I have at farmers' markets," he said. Other growers murmured their agreement because farmers' markets require all items to be homegrown, and a watchdog group is constantly worried that purchased flowers might be sneaked into the market. Plus, they frown upon the containers needed to hold the arrangements and other items sometimes incorporated into value-added products.

"During off season, being able to include shipped flowers would help," Maskewitz said of the eye appeal a variety of blooms offer.

A grower's time is largely consumed by educating customers on flowers and preserving them.

"Even retailers don't know how to use many varieties," Maskewitz said.

Designers are often searching for new varieties of cut flowers and often are eager to guarantee sales. However, if cut blooms are not properly conditioned, they will not last long.

"Properly conditioned flowers

can last three weeks," Maskewitz said.

Depending on the variety, flowers are conditioned in different ways. Some require seared stems. Most need to be stuck in tepid water up to 100 degrees when first picked and then transferred to cool water.

Workshops at the convention can help growers determine proper care and save them many dollars lost through learning by trial and error.

Growers also discussed the best methods for drying flowers fast and easy while retaining color. While some have had success with the microwave and with silica gel, they agreed that the most economical and less labor-intensive method was hanging blooms upside down in a hot, dry, dark area.

Another problem faced by market-goers is the time required to set up and tear down displays. Most of the growers interviewed estimated set up and tear down time required 1½ hours each.

Despite the best laid plans, flower sales are largely dependent on weather.

"If it's a cool, dark day, people don't buy flowers," King said of market days. "But if it's bright sunny weather, everything goes."

"Even if its drooping," Maskewitz injected.

The most popular homegrown cut flower among most of the growers interviewed was lisanthus. Curly willow is also popular. It's prolific and fast-growing, which is both a positive and negative trait.

"After awhile you wish you didn't grow it," Maskewitz said of the plant's aggressive nature.

Ambrose and his wife Sally grow 200 varieties on two acres in Stahlstown. "Labor rules keep getting worse," Ambrose said of never-ending changes. Gone are the days when a housewife could fill in a few hours on occasion. "You need to withhold taxes if a



Nasturtium seed germinates in 7-10 days. In addition to their beauty, the abundant blooms can be cut for use as an elegant entree garnish and the leaves add a tart flavor to fresh salads.

person earns \$150, or a crew \$2,500."

Robert Shaeffer of Dauphin County is retired from Penn State extension but attends the annual convention to renew his pesticide license for his home gardening hobby. More than 30 pesticide credits are available for convention-goers.

In addition to the workshops, Mathias considers the convention a boom for finding and buying new equipment at the convention's comprehensive trade show.

A beekeeper, Mathias looks for promotional materials to pick up and use in his Honey Crest Farm operation. He also raises cut flowers and two acres of broom corn for florists in his area. Although growers face frustration with florists who say they can purchase cut flowers cheaper from international markets, Mathias said, "We have a 48-hour

advantage over shipped flowers. Fresher is important in our market."

Mathias also forces fruit blossoms from his orchard pruning. Springtime blooms of pear, cherry, apple, and peach are highly favored by florists. Mathias sells them in bunches of 10 stems, which florists use to insert with other flowers in arrangements.

To save a lot of headaches, Mathias believes growers should take the Capitol Area Beekeeping course offered through Penn State.

The annual convention is a joint effort of the State Horticultural Association of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association, Maryland State Horticultural Society, New Jersey Horticultural Society, and Penn State, Rutgers, and University of Maryland Cooperative Extensions.

Bring Your Home To Life With Fresh Flowers

(NAPS) — Flowers are a growing trend in home decor. From carnations to roses, floral arrangements can be an inexpensive way to make a house feel more like a home.

The good news is decorating with flowers may be easier than you think. Whether you pick up a few stems at the florist, supermarket or corner stand, with a little budding creativity, you can add elegance and color to your house in no time. Try following these decorating tips to add a natural flair to your house with flowers:

- Use Creative Containers. A good rule of thumb is that if it can hold water, it can hold flowers. Old watering cans, cast iron kettles, antique coal holders and teapots can make great bases for doorstep, country kitchen or bath arrangements.

- Spruce Up And Cover Up. Flowers can be an elegant and creative way to hide your home's

flaws. For example, a bouquet of flowers can be a colorful way to hide a water stain on table linens.

- Let Your Imagination Bloom. Collect an assortment of plain bottles and add a few colorful stems to each. Another idea is to float flower heads in bowls filled with water. Add floating candles for a bright and shining effect on the window ledge.

- Let Every Room Bloom. Try some flowers across the mantle or bookshelf in a den or an empty juice bottle filled with flowers in the kitchen or a cup of flowers in the bathroom to freshen up the room.

In addition, a few beautiful stems can add a soft and relaxing feel to the bedroom, or a bright and cheery look to your office.

Flowers can bring most any room alive with possibilities. For more creative decorating ideas visit www.flowerpossibilities.com.



Salvias make great cut flowers. From spikey height to miniature bouquets, salvias add touches of color whether fresh or dried. Dahlias are another favorite with designers.

Home Gardeners' School Is March 10

DANVILLE (Montour Co.) — Penn State Cooperative Extension in cooperation with area garden clubs will present a home gardeners' school on Saturday, March 10 from 8:30 a.m. until 4

p.m. at Mifflinburg Area High School.

Participants include "Gardening with Native Plants," David Beattie, Penn State University; "Floral Design," Ed Auman,

Rine's Flower Shop and Greenhouse; Selinsgrove; "The Aquatic Gardener," Jon Stauffer, Aquatic Gems, Dillsburg; "Plant Propagation," Earl Ferry, Selinsgrove H.S. Vocational Ag.; "Tree and Shrub Care," Jim Sellmer, Penn

State University; "Container Gardening," Keith Phelps, Country Farm and Home, Mifflinburg; "Weed Free Gardens — Organically," Mark Guenther, Tait Farms, Port Matilda.

Registration fee is \$20. This

fee includes a box lunch and refreshments. Deadline for registration is Feb. 28. Registration forms are available at area garden centers or Mary Carbaugh, 161 Moser Road, Danville, PA 17821, Phone: (570) 275-7848.