

## Thoughts on Cut Flower Production Opportunities

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*Faye Johnstone and Jamie Andrews don't think of cut flowers as a new opportunity, but rather, as one that must be approached from a new perspective. Customers are becoming more aware of the ethical issues associated with cut flower production abroad and customer tastes are becoming more varied. However, Faye and Jamie emphasize the importance of continuing to educate your client base, from market customers, to florists, to grocers. Following an introduction to the industry as a whole, Faye and Jamie discussed the successes and challenges they've encountered with marketing and selling through various outlets. This was followed by practical techniques for planting, harvesting, and storing cut flowers.*

### *Introduction*

Faye and Jamie are fairly recent transplants from the UK and they have been actively farming for 2 years. They grow mainly herbs and flowers. Faye and Jamie sell at several farmers' markets, as well as to a local florist. They began by selling at small local markets, but they must now travel to the Halifax Seaport market to increase sales.

### *Cut flowers as a new opportunity*

It's not necessarily a new opportunity, but an opportunity that needs a new lease on life. People have been using cut flowers for centuries, so it's sad to be looking at cut flowers as an alternative crop. Cut flower production is a \$41 million industry in Canada; however, the focus in data for the industry seems to be on potted plants.

### *A large-scale look at production*

Until recently, Nova Scotia was exporting cut flowers to the US. There is a potential to sell across Canada. Farmers' markets are a big outlet for cut flowers and people are more interested in buying cut flowers domestically or locally as they become more aware of environmental and social issues surrounding flower production abroad. In addition, consumers' tastes in flowers are changing and becoming more varied.

28% of people in the US regularly purchase cut flowers, but mostly for gifts. In contrast, 55% of people in Holland regularly purchase cut flowers for themselves. 2-3 times as many cut flowers are sold in Europe and Asia than in North America.

Producing flowers that can't be shipped could provide an advantage over imported flowers. Fuel prices will have an impact on imports and field production will have an advantage over heated greenhouses.

### *Farmers' markets*

Keep in mind that if you're producing crops other than flowers, such as vegetables, it can be challenging for customers to see beyond the flowers. Consider maintaining separate areas for flowers and other crops so that flowers don't hide anything else you're selling. However, if you do sell other crops, make a few pre-arranged bouquets stand out by placing them among vegetables or fruits. Faye emphasizes to not be afraid to throw something out if it doesn't look right. Don't take the risk of selling an inferior product and losing customers.

Cellophane bouquet packaging sells the best because it looks like something you'd buy at a florist. Brown craft paper is attractive, but it will get wet and soggy, so wrap flowers only after they've been sold. Waxed tissue paper is another option, as it has the look of paper, but doesn't get soggy like craft paper.

### *Market customers*

You will have to face customers' perception that cut flowers are wild flowers or flowers they could grow themselves, not realizing the work that goes into production. People think Faye and Jamie have a garden rather than a farm; they are not familiar with the concept of a flower farm. Take this with a grain of salt and use the opportunity to inform people that flowers can come from a local farmer, just like food.

You can face competition from home gardeners, especially at rural markets, so it can be hard to judge pricing. Also, you may have to convince customers that your flowers are going to last, but with a clean operation, preservatives are not needed.

Customers will want to know why they should buy organic flowers. Pesticide use is high on imported flowers, such that many florists wear gloves when handling flowers and can develop skin problems. In response to this concern, emphasize your sustainable growing practices, but don't condemn florists because you want to work with them, not turn people away from them.

### *Florists*

Florists are used to dealing with wholesalers rather than farms, so they will want everything to have a standard size and appearance. They're also accustomed to being able to get what they want when they want and you might face no-shows or cancelled orders. Florists are also nervous about finding insects in organic flowers and they expect that organic flowers will have insect damage. It's therefore essential to demonstrate to florists that you have great-quality cuts. Show up throughout the season

with a variety of flowers and be aware that you might have to educate florists about flowers they don't know.

### *Marketing challenges*

It can be hard to get to market, due to the low population density of the Maritimes. At market, it takes time to build up a clientele. In order to offer a nice presentation to customers, you may have to be both the grower *and* the florist.

Florists do not always get enough traffic in rural areas, so they want to buy flowers that last as long as a couple of weeks. Florists are also not trained on how to use local flowers.

### *Marketing opportunities*

You have the potential to sell to restaurants, cafes, farm shops, and grocery stores. Restaurants can be a regular outlet, but demand is limited and most restaurants prefer to make bunches themselves. Grocery stores want top quality, long-lasting flowers and bunches that all look the same. In order to provide nice, standard-looking bouquets, you will have to factor in additional time and packaging costs and you may have to work with the store on a proper display for your bouquets. A good display can make an enormous difference in sales.

A CSA is a possibility if you have a place to keep the flowers cool and watered before they are picked up. Consider using a local florist as a pick-up location.

A U-pick could work if you have a space set up for it. It can help bring traffic and new customers to your farm. However, it is a time consuming venture, with customers coming and going frequently. If you go this route, clearly separate your market production from your u-pick production, or at least keep high-value flowers out of the u-pick areas so they aren't damaged or picked at the wrong time by customers.

### *Weddings*

Be aware that this can be a huge stress, as there are often last-minute changes and demanding wedding participants. People may want very specific flowers/colors and it is challenging to time that for a certain date. Depending on how involved you are, remember that this can be a huge added responsibility on top of your normal market sales, etc. You can prepare flower arrangements yourself, but you may also want to collaborate with a florist, wedding planner, etc.

### *Other opportunities*

- Dried flowers for winter sales
- Your farm as a wedding venue
- Hotels

- B&Bs

### *Pricing*

Pricing is very hard to judge and it's all about perception. For example, commercial snapdragons often have weak stems that snap, so a florist may actually be willing to pay 30% more for a thick stem that doesn't break. The most important thing to remember is to have a marketing plan worked out before you start.

### *Preparation*

Faye and Jamie sell a bit of everything: single stems, bunches, and various sizes of arrangements. The more time you spend playing around with the flowers, the less time they'll last. If customers are concerned about flowers drying out, send them off with flowers in mason jars or wrapped in a wet paper towel and a plastic bag, cellophane, or waxed tissue paper. You can put bouquets together in front of people at the market to inspire them to make their own bouquets.

### *Types of flowers*

Don't just stick to flowers! Use shrubs, evergreens, grains (barley, oats), and plants gone to seed (parsley). Bulbs are a lot of work to maintain from year to year. Lilies are beautiful and high-value, but be sure to protect them from deer, who will eat the tops off. Grow flowers you can dry and sell in the off-season.

### *Production challenges*

An earthway seeder can be used for many seeds, but some seed is so small that you must insert it by hand with a pencil dipped in water. Some flowers have to be seeded as early as February to allow them a full growing season. Plan for succession seeding of annuals and think ahead with biennials and perennials.

### *Harvesting*

Sterilize your harvest buckets and fill with very cold, clean water. Harvest in the early morning and early evening. Strip stems in the field because the leaves will contaminate the water with bacteria, resulting in a shorter life for the flowers. Get flowers out of the sun as soon as possible and don't bunch in the field. The more you handle the flowers in the field, the more you decrease their life.

You'll have to consult the weather to properly time the harvest. If you have to pick earlier because of imminent rain, you'll have to pick flowers with barely open buds. It can be hard to harvest with volunteers and labor because flowers can be so delicate and you're looking for a very particular product and presentation.

For storage, anything that releases ethylene (e.g. tomatoes and other fruits or fruiting vegetables) can't be in the cold room or in your vehicle with the flowers.

### Q&A

One farmer sometimes gives a small bouquet for free to regular customers who spend more than \$20 early in the morning. This can encourage customer loyalty, spread the word about your farm, and get someone walking around the market with one of your bouquets.

Another farmer works in annual cut flowers between her vegetable rows (every 7th row) to encourage beneficials. Some flowers include dill, alyssum, bachelor's button, and sunflowers.

Regarding manure as fertilizer, do organic regulations apply to flower production? No, you don't have to allow a certain amount of time between manure application and planting. However, if you don't adhere to rules regarding manure application and you sell a cut flower that might also be considered edible, you do have to inform customers that the flower should not be consumed.