

## **Selling Plant in Pots: Possible Profits, Possible Disappointments**

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What is the relative worth, sold retail, of these products?

- 8 ears of corn- in August, Sept.
- 8 pickling cukes- in July, Aug., Sept.
- 2 cucumber seedlings in 3 inch pots – in June
- 2 tomato plants in 3 inch pots- in late May, June
- 1 quart of baby new potatoes, anytime
- 1 specialty annual in a 4 inch or 4 1/2 inch pot- May, June
- 1 perennial herb in a 4 inch pot in May and June (thyme, sage, etc.)
- 2 morning glory plants in 3 inch pots in early June
- 2 bunches of cut basil in August
- 1 small nosegay of cut sweet pea blossoms

At our farm this year all of the above items sold for \$4.00 each, retail at our home store or at our truck at Farmers' Markets.

Clearly some of the \$4.00 items took longer to achieve marketability than others. Some required many more inputs and were only marginally profitable. Some are universally valued by customers. Some are price sensitive. All were part of our product mix.

This is a talk about selling plants in pots, where there are possible profits and possible disappointments. This will not come as a surprise to a group of vegetable and small fruit growers.

My husband John Snell, Jr. and I run a small farm in Southern Maine in Bar Mills, a village in Buxton, beside the Saco River, next town west of Gorham. We are 10 miles north of Saco, and 15 miles west of Portland. We used to expect our last spring frost around the first of June, and the first frost of fall around September 21. Recently we have enjoyed a much longer growing season.

John and I have been farming on our own since 1976 when we began taking vegetables to the Saco Farmers' Market from our oversized family vegetable garden. At the time the Snells were wholesale apple growers, with some local sales of utility apples, some early potatoes, and a little sweet corn. Historically, John's grandfather Henry and later father John Sr., had been poultry producers (eggs, mostly) from the late 1920's through the early 1960's when small scale poultry became unprofitable. The point behind this history is that we had a tradition of diversifying, changing as economic factors shifted. So, we started going to market in Saco, raising and selling vegetables, apples and cider.

At the time, the fields we used for vegetable production were converted hay fields: low lying, heavy to clay, cold, and late. They were also very fertile, very productive, especially in dry times, but very late to work. After some early maple syrup sales, it was a long time until the next cash flow of the season.

I was going to farmers' market in early spring with storage root crops, dry beans, maple syrup, and a few daffodils and pussy willows. I watched while farmers with new greenhouses sold plants to eager customers from mid-May through Memorial Day. By today's standards, these were unsophisticated plants—mostly packs of seeded annuals, a few tomato plants, geraniums and some motley hanging baskets. I watched, but I didn't think growing plants was for us. I thought we had chosen maple as a spring activity and greenhouses seemed beyond our scope. Also, we lived off-farm at the time and had no land of our own for a greenhouse site.

Eventually, we built a small mobile roadside stand on a trailer base and were very excited about selling our vegetables along side our fields in addition to farmers' markets. We put up a sign: Peas On Friday. We decorated the tongue of the trailer with two long window boxes of red geraniums and green ivy to dress things up a bit and keep people from tripping over the tongue. To our delight, people started to stop—but they wanted to buy the geraniums, not the vegetables. It took us several more years to understand that we needed to grow flowers, too. In 1986 we finally built our first greenhouse, a 48 x 27 N.E. style, which was immediately too small. We built cold frames every week for a while.

Side note--Now we are a little more receptive to people's requests and a special little bell goes off in our heads when we find ourselves saying "no" to too many customers.

Twenty-one years later we now have 14 greenhouses and sell plants from late April through October. With a combination of hard work and careful planning, our three children have gone to college debt free. The fact that we raise plants and sell them retail has played a major role in the economic survival of both our farm and our family.

So now I'll tell you exactly how to succeed at plant production. This is not possible, since there are as many solutions and approaches as there are farmers. One interesting advantage we found early in our greenhouse experience was that really nice, smart people are attracted to greenhouse work. We have not lacked for employees in the greenhouse and many have stayed on through vegetable season. The spring comes early in the greenhouses, and it is mostly pleasant work. Our crew has been together for many years.

It has taken me thirty years of adding new crops to realize that every new enterprise will entail more work and more time and attention. Now, that's pretty basic, but somehow our emphasis has always been on the profitability of a new enterprise, figuring that the work will somehow just get done and our time is endless. Not so.

Before beginning a greenhouse crop, consider if you have time and energy for adding anything else. You will need to work Saturdays and Sundays. You will need to be endlessly checking on things. Furnaces stall. Hoses burst. Doors blow open on cold nights. Aphid and mites may gang up on you. You may need to hire some help. Who is your customer anyway? You will need to talk to people and explain lots of things you consider obvious or second nature to well intentioned people who don't seem to have a clue. How much of what should you plant? You should go slowly and build your markets.

Timing is extremely important when raising plants in pots, just as scheduling your plantings in the field may mean the difference between a steady supply and a glut of some product. We avoid the coldest weather and shortest days by delaying our

greenhouse opening until mid-March. Waiting to get started is very hard for many people and some would rather pay for fuel and be “doing something” rather than waiting patiently.

We identify our target selling time for most tender plants as late May, Memorial time and the month of June. An overgrown plant may be upgraded to a larger pot, but it is better to have your seedlings coming on and growing steadily rather than suffering for a few weeks in too small a pot.

What will make your products special? Unlike our early days in the greenhouse business when just about anything in a pot would sell, recently there has been an oversupply of plant material, nationally. Pansies no longer interest people the way they did twenty years ago. Many of us have been decreasing the numbers of geraniums we are raising. Over the past two years, we have cut back our hardy mum production by 2,000 pots. The “big box” stores carry tons of plants, even some which used to be considered specialty items. Increased mechanization has made cheap plants possible. The movement is away from pack material toward more 4 inch pots. “Proven Winners” are everywhere.

There is, however, a shortage of high quality vegetable and herb seedlings for sale by knowledgeable growers and salespeople. Salesmanship is important. People need and want advice about their vegetable gardens. (Full sun!! Full sun!!) You must enjoy working with people and at the same time value your plants. Your attitude can't be, “I'm just doing this until the **real farming** gets going.

Often emphasis gets placed on the **tech** of an operation, in this case the greenhouse facility itself, and any automatic bells and whistles that come with it. But the greenhouse structure is just the beginning, enabling the crops to develop. The proper varieties need to be chosen to perform well in the home garden. Cheapness of seed is not a good criterion for variety choice. Ornamental growers are likely to just take any old pepper seed, for example, as long as it's not expensive. As vegetable growers, we know variety selection is very important. Each crop needs a seeding schedule, so that you have the right number of plant at the right time. We seed tomatoes, not once, but weekly for six weeks, so that when some plants sell there are others to fill in the benches where they were. We want the right sized plant for the right size pot when the customer buys it.

Cucumber seedlings are one of our most profitable crops. Cukes in a 3 inch pot have a 2-3 week turn on the bench. There is a high demand. We seed every other week from mid-May through the first of July. This is not an early crop. You almost don't need a greenhouse for it, but warm nights will keep powdery mildew away from your seedlings.

You may say, “But cucumbers! Anybody could just put in a few seeds!” True. But the average consumer doesn't have seeds, hates to waste a whole package, doesn't quite believe that they can make seeds grow, anyway. The hardest job you will have concerning cucumber seedlings will be convincing people to wait until warm weather before buying the young plants. Incidentally, we sell cukes, melons, squash, zukes, pumpkins, peppers, and tomatoes all in single 3 inch pots, since a pack of plants is too many for most home gardeners. They would rather pay more per plant than have too many plants. We do lettuce in 806's, still, and cole crops in 804's, with many plantings, so the plants don't stall in the small cells. We have had lovely tomato plants in deep

606's, but we need to charge more for the larger pack size. The deeper cell allows a stretching plug to be plunged deep in the soil for a sturdy plant in two weeks.

An added benefit to being in the greenhouse business is the use of the greenhouse space for unexpected uses. At Snell Farm these include: a maple café on Maine Maple Weekend, a garlic drying house, inside basil production, tomato packing space, equipment storage in winter, a warm open space for projects on sunny winter days, and Thanksgiving dining space for a growing family.

Unfortunate weather events probably supply most of the disappointments in any farming adventure, and potted plant crops are no exception. We have experienced the collapse of a greenhouse under snow load. Three years ago we suffered a month's worth of rainy weekends which delayed, postponed, and cancelled lots of the plant sales for that year. To a certain extent, plants in a greenhouse are protected from bad weather, but if they are ready for sale and your schedule depends on their being sold so there is room for the next generation of plants, a rainy weekend can really foul things up. Several rainy markets in a row can really sink your cash flow. That was the year that our vegetable crops pulled us along toward profitability. It's good to be diversified.

My husband John says the greenhouse crops are very much like the old Snell chicken operation of his grandfather's day. There were several henhouses spread out around the farm, each one holding a certain age of chicken, carefully watched. When John goes on his rounds to check on the greenhouses late at night he thinks of his grandfather's midnight walks through the henhouses. Like his grandfather before him, John checks that doors are closed and the temperature is correct, fans and furnaces running. Like poultry production at one time, greenhouse plants are intensely managed crops which can return handsomely when done well, and not treated as a commodity.

How are your crops special?