

Taking Cut Flowers from Sideshow to Main Event: The Tipping Points of Growing Our Flower Business

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We wanted flowers to be a serious part of our business and income, so we decided to take flowers seriously. In 2006 I became a partner in the flower business. In 2011 I became the sole proprietor.

Malcolm Gladwell's book *Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* has inspired me to share some of the specific changes we have made to our flower enterprise. Each of these changes has led to more improvements than we anticipated.

Tipping point: We set up the cut flower business as separate from the veggies and plants.

Different folks give the enterprise fresh energy for planning, growing, and selling. The variety of crops required to have a constant supply of blooms for 3 seasons requires similar intellectual attention to a mixed vegetable crop repertoire. I am lucky to have access to the land, greenhouses, markets, branding, and equipment from my folks' farm, but my attention is almost always on flowers.

We cut our first stems of daffodils mid-April and our last stems of spider mums around December 1st. This also allows our customers to rely on our having some kind of floral beauty for them though our whole market season, and it helps me know I can build event flowers around whatever's seasonal.

We plan for succession plantings. We went from 3 plantings of sunflowers to about 8. We grow 3 waves of zinnias. You wouldn't plant just one crop of lettuce and expect it to meet your demands for the summer. Sunflowers are similar (but less washing!).

Having someone almost always thinking about flowers has led to planting more perennial crops to fill in gaps in annual production. Many of these shrubs offer greenery which adds more interest and texture to our bouquets and designs. We continue to invest in perennial crops like peonies, hydrangeas, physocarpus, and daffodils.

Keeping the income of the flower business separate is a great way to appreciate the value of the flower enterprise.

I used to help with the veggie harvest, but now that I'm a full time flower lady, I can plan to make a wedding delivery on a Friday if necessary, and keep my head in the flower game.

Our flower tools are mostly used just for flowers, that way we have enough of the right sized buckets and really sharp snippers. We then don't dull other tools for cutting the eggplant, trimming the onion tops, and picking pumpkins.

Having separate staffing means fewer negotiations to get jobs done. I now have some of my own employees, that way I can prioritize things like weeding the eucalyptus instead of putting that in the context of everything else that needs to be done on the farm.

Tipping point: We joined the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers.

The Bulletin Board alone is worth the membership fee, but the *Cut Flower Quarterly* magazine is also a valuable resource, not to mention regional meetings, networking contacts, and national conferences.

This reframed the way we thought about flowers as a business. We went from growing a nice mix of flowers for bouquets to being flower farmers. Mom calls this "admitting what business you're in."

Discussions at ASCFG meetings and on the Bulletin Board also led me to making multiple bouquet sizes and often rethinking our pricing schedule. (\$12 is the new \$10!)

I also learned from bulletin board discussions about starting conversations about event flowers with a professional tone.

Tipping Point: Wedding flowers are a service, not just a product:

Polly Hutchinson, active member/officer of the ASCFG, said something at a flower meeting that totally changed the way I think about wedding flowers. Folks were casually talking about how annoying and cheap some brides are about their flowers. A naïve me said something like "Well, I think people want to buy flowers from a farm because it's so much less expensive." And Polly said "We try really hard to make sure that's not the case."

I felt empowered.

We finally recognized that making a bridal bouquet is different than making a bouquet to offer for sale at farmers' market. Even if they have similar ingredients, there are many more emails and much more care and stress wrapped up in that bridal bouquet.

To take away some of the stress of designing for weddings I have set up connections with floral wholesalers, so if I just plain need something red or yellow or blue I can get it. I have my local connections to call first, but this way I don't lie awake wondering whether any of the red dahlias will happen to be open that week, or worry my delphinium finally succumbed to powdery mildew. This has also enabled me to take on weddings in May and June and late September and October, times when the flower supply is unpredictable.

We have created a system for handling wedding inquiries and giving brides the attention they need for their initial consultation. This requires a lot of time for correspondence. We love email for this. (There's a record of it and you can answer emails early or late.) Wedding deposits also provide some very appreciated winter cash flow.

In writing a wedding estimate I have more than once found myself thinking “well, if I have enough of my own dahlias/lisianthus/sunflowers/peonies, it won’t cost as much as if I have to buy them in.” Flowers shipped in are almost never as good as the ones we grow that have never been in a box and on trucks and planes. So instead of charging more if disaster strikes, we have learned to fully value the flowers we grow from the outset.

We have also developed a system for selling flowers to brides who want to arrange their own wedding flowers. Most people can’t just show up at a Saturday market for flowers for a Saturday wedding. We sell a mixture of flowers in all colors or certain colors in 2-gallon buckets. These flowers are reserved with a deposit and can be picked up at the farm or delivered. This model has worked well and is way less time consuming than explaining every flower we might have available and getting a target volume for each one and then worrying if I might have enough bunches of lime zinnias or whatever.

I’ve made offering delivery a priority. Most people cannot fit their whole flower order into their mid-sized sedans. I have learned to value this time and charge for this service.

Tipping Point: We built a cooler just for flowers.

Fruit and flowers aren’t friends; they need separate space. A cooler also lets you cut more marketable stems and keep the quality up.

We used to harvest on Tuesdays and Fridays for markets Wednesdays and Saturdays. Having cooler space has allowed us to pick flowers when they’re just right and hold them for our market days.

The flowers that require the most constant cutting attention are tulips, peonies, lilies, and sunflowers.

To maintain the highest quality product, we continue to learn the proper stages of harvest and post-harvest treatments. The happier the flowers are the happier our customers are.

The cooler is also very important for conditioning any flowers we do end up buying in for weddings and also keeping our finished products fresh before pick up or delivery.

Tipping Point: We devoted both hoophouse and greenhouse growing space to flowers.

Greenhouse structures are great for season extension in spring and fall. They also are especially useful for protecting delicate floral tissue from rain and wind. We have rotated one of our hoophouses into and out of flowers each year, and will add another this year.

It’s easier to trellis things in a hoop house. (Sweet Peas!)

It’s nice to have a place to harvest or weed or work when it’s raining.

We double crop our plant greenhouses with lisianthus, asters, dahlias, and fancy mums.

Our three newest important additions:

A guillotine for cutting stems has saved our fatigued hands and made for happy stems.

A light box for photography has facilitated better documentation of our design work.

A new gator has made for hassle-free harvesting.