

Starting a Specialty Cut Flower Farm – What to Grow and Where to Sell

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For over ten years, Michael has worked his way around the farming and cut flower industries to expand his knowledge for a solid foundation in the Specialty Cut Flower Marketplace. Join Michael as he shares his experience and helps you answer two big questions that arise when starting a cut flower farm.

WHERE WILL I SELL?

There are many markets for selling specialty cut flowers and you need to find the markets that best fit your personality and your farm.

Roadside Stand: Location is the biggest decider in how successful a roadside stand can be. A busy street versus a low traveled country road can make a huge difference. Beyond physical location you will need an inviting location with a clean and attractive stand. Our farm shares property with a vegetable farm and we found we had better sales if both of us had a well-stocked stand. Our second season the vegetable farm was not very active in the stand so we saw a big decrease in sales at the stand.

CSA Shares: A flower only CSA or Flower Club is a new idea for many consumers. Subscriptions can be promoted to homeowners, offices, salons, B&B's and are great to promote as birthday, anniversary or holiday gifts. We had an opportunity to offer our shares along side a fruit and vegetable CSA from a nearby friend and had good success with that. Select the right amount of weeks to fit your growing season that also allows you some flexibility.

Event Flowers: The move towards local flowers has built a big calling from brides and other event planners. If you have a design background and the patience of dealing with brides and mothers of the brides this can be a good sales route. Just keep in mind this is very time consuming in both the planning, designing and set up of the flowers so make sure you are not giving too much for too little. A lower maintenance option is buckets of loose flowers or selling of bunches of flowers for the D-I-Y customer.

Farmers Market: Farmers' Markets offer many opportunities to farmers, but can be used in many different ways. Some farms use a market for simply that marketing and building relationships. Other growers who focus on sales to florists may use a market as a way to move large quantities of flowers or flowers that are not at the quality florists are looking for. For our farm we did not have the flexibility for a weekend market and weeknight markets in our area are not busy enough to make the time worthwhile for us. As business people we really tried to push away from the low prices of our competitors and found that even with our higher pricing, that is something to keep in mind when selling at markets. Home grown does not mean cheap.

Direct to Florist: This is the market place we are looking to make the main focus of our business. With retail and wholesale background we have familiarity with the needs of florists. Local growers can offer a quality and variety of products that florists would love to work with but do not have easy access to. It can take some time to get into florist and build those business to business relationships but we found that with stopping at two to three florists we could bring in the same amount of money compared to sitting at a market for 4 hours. One key for us with florists is quality. Sometimes our biggest moneymaker was leaving a sample of products for them to try.

WHAT WILL I GROW?

Developing an answer to “**WHERE WILL I SELL?**” will help determine what you will grow. Each marketplace has a calling for different flowers. Inquiring with local florists on their interest in needs is helpful when going after that market. If you are doing mixed bouquets you can really get away with doing a large variety and then slimming down your options in future seasons.

As a grower you will need to make the decision between annuals, perennials and woodies as well as to start your own seed or buy plants. Deciding on both of these is dependent on your market, available land, indoor growing space and the amount of time and energy you have to put into your business. A resource for helping make this decision is the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG). This is a group of growers and educators compiling, publishing, sharing information to help make each of us a better grower and business person. Each year members trial, nominate and vote for cut flower of the year which now include a new fresh, woody, dried and bulb crop each season. Visit www.ascfg.org to find out more about the association and to see what growers have said are their favorites.

Great Flowers To Start With

Each of these can be either direct sown or the corm can be planted directly into the ground, with minimal weeding, fertilizer and watering you can harvest a luscious blooms.

Amaranthus Cosmos Sunflowers Zinnias Gladiolus Broom Corn

15 Popular Specialty Cut Flowers

When you get more adventurous and your confidence grows this list is of 15 popular specialty cut flowers that are commonly grown by specialty cut flower farmers.

*Sunflowers Lisianthus Snapdragons Celosia Zinnia Dianthus Ageratum
Statice Lilies Dahlias Hydrangeas Larkspur Grasses Peonies Gomphrena*

Cut Flower Of The Year Winners

These are all winners of Cut Flower of the Year from ASCFG (Visit www.ASCFG.org for a full listing) but I only included my favorites that I have grown or have seen successfully grown.

*Zinnia ‘Benary’s Giant’ Rudbeckia ‘Indian Summer’ Eustoma ‘Echo’ series (Lisianthus)
Ageratum ‘Tall Blue Horizon’ Dianthus ‘Amazon Neon Duo’ Eryngium ‘Blue Glitter’
Ilex verticillata ‘Winter Red’ (Winter Berry) Hydrangea paniculata ‘Limelight’
Zinnia ‘Uproar Rose’ Lisianthus ‘Mariachi Carmine’ Viburnum ‘Snowball’
Physocarpus ‘Coppertina’ (Nine Bark) Paeonia ‘Sarah Bernhardt’
Lavendula xintermedia ‘Grosso’ Sorghum bicolor Panicum ‘Frosted Explosion’*