

My Second Year



By Roger C. Styer

Well here it is, the end of my second year growing summer cut flowers for my new company, Country Fresh Flowers. It was with sadness and gladness that I finished cleaning the field for winter. I can hardly believe the summer is gone, but what a summer it was here in the Chicago area! Record heat and drought, but no plague or swarm of locusts, thank goodness. So for those readers who keep asking me how my cut flower business is doing, this report's for you.

Surprises And Disappointments

Even though we had one of the hottest and driest years on record, my cut flowers did well with the drip irrigation I installed, except some of the perennials planted in late April; those were taken out by a late freeze. The drip irrigation easily supplied the moisture needed for good growth, and the dry weather meant no Botrytis. However, the heat did knock down my plant stands right after transplanting, no matter what time of day I planted.

The increased production worked out well, but I did run into problems with too much of some crops coming all at once due to the heat. Crops such as snaps, lisianthus and even sunflowers were the main culprits. Digitalis, delphinium, trachelium and sweet peas also did unusually well considering the heat, and pumpkin-on-a-stick was outstanding for the fall season. Crops that did poorly this year included cosmos (from overfeeding), campanula (rain wiped out the flowers) and oriental lilies (just not up to snuff). Some sunflower varieties also dropped petals too easily after harvesting.

The equipment I added made a big difference. I installed deer fencing around the sunflower field. It completely stopped the munching, and all it took was a solar-powered charger, white polytape, fiberglass posts and some peanut butter. Transplanting into the field was also much easier with the Pottapukki tube transplanters I purchased. In fact, I transplanted all the plants myself, with no bending over needed.

Having student and housewife crews cut and make bouquets worked out great. All of the

crews worked really hard so we could get out of the fields by noon because of the heat. It looks like I will have all of them back again next year. My daughter did work a lot more than last year and will increase her hours next year so she can save up some money.

Three farmer's markets were a chore to do myself. Traffic was not so good at two of them, but the third was great. I think the heat may have had something to do with the reduced traffic. I did get some special orders for parties and showers through contacts at the markets. And my emphasis on fresh cut, local production was a good message for the farmer's markets and local florist. Quality sells, but so does the life of the flowers.

The overall goal of the business for the next year is to make a profit (really!), have a better product mix, produce and cut the flowers easier with the best quality possible, and develop more markets for my flowers.

Still, it wasn't all good. I can't believe I had rust on my snaps with no rain. It was probably due to their placement on the low end of the field, morning dew and some ground fog. Powdery mildew did not show up until later. We did keep cucumber beetles under control, but weeds took off whenever it did rain.

Changes For Next Year

In preparation for next year, I am going to work up a new piece of land ($\frac{1}{3}$ acre) by


putting in a cover crop that will be disked under in the spring when it's time to plant. I am also putting in a designated perennial area, complete with a weed mat. I need to learn more about perennials and expand my offerings in that area.

I also need to improve my oriental lily production and quality. To do this, I will be using a bigger bulb size and starting the bulbs in a cooler at 55° F for two weeks. I need to get \$3-4 per stem for lilies at the markets. Another thing that might help is reducing the number of varieties but producing more of each with better scheduling.

My staff helped with cutting and putting bouquets together, but I did all the row-making and transplanting myself. Next year, I will have some help transplanting and will buy two more tube transplanters to make it easier and faster. My efforts need to be concentrated on marketing and sales instead of labor.

The biggest area where I can increase my business is local florists. I will emphasize weekly deliveries to a number of them and reduce my farmer's markets to just weekends. I'll need to adjust my prices for retail florist as well...much higher.

The plantings after July 4th really helped out. However, it's still a guess as to what the weather will be all summer. The farmer's markets ended at the beginning of October, but I could go on with retail florists longer if there's no frost or freeze.

The overall goal of the business for the next year is to make a profit (really!), have a better product mix, produce and cut the flowers easier with the best quality possible, and develop more markets for my flowers. I can't wait until next April when we start planting again. Got to get back to all of these catalogs I have for seed, plants and bulbs. It will be tough to narrow down the choices to what I can fit in the field and the market. But I love this job! 

Roger Styer is president of Styer's Horticultural Consulting, Inc., Batavia, Ill. He can be reached by phone at (630) 208-0542 or E-mail at carleton@voyager.net.