

The First Year



By Roger C. Styer

Back in May of this year, I wrote about a new business I was setting up called Country Fresh Flowers. The idea was to grow and sell field-grown summer cut flowers to local retail florists and at farmer's markets in my home area. Well, I made it through the first year in one piece! The business did not make a profit in the first year due to all of the supplies we had to buy, but the market was very receptive to the bouquets we made up for a couple of farmer's markets. We sold out most weeks and developed a very loyal clientele. People were amazed that the bouquets lasted 7-14 days. And every week seemed to bring different flowers or colors to the bouquets.

MEETING MY GOALS

If you remember, I had several reasons for getting into this business, and here's my report card on those reasons:

1. The business definitely forced me to stay home more during June through September. I cut out all non-essential travel and kept my consulting trips to three days or less. I had to, as I had market days on Thursdays and Sundays. I was the one doing the farmer's markets, so I had to be there.

2. I found the demand for my bouquets to be more than I could supply from just $\frac{1}{4}$ acre. So, next year, we will double the size of the field and add some perennials and bulbs.

3. I learned about local consumers' preferences. People come there looking for locally grown fresh products. Price can be an issue if you

have a lot of competition, but if you have different products, the uniqueness sells. I could compete very well against flower stands with imported flowers and against produce farmers with some field-grown cuts. Our bouquets were never the same and were displayed in Mason jars so people could see the whole bouquet. I had a couple of ladies helping make bouquets (my daughter included), and I made up many of them myself (believe it or not!). When customers would come into my booth, they would have a hard time deciding which bouquet they liked the best. But it was the most enjoyable hard decision they had to make!

4. This new business really did get me back to my roots. I got my hands dirty plenty of times. I did a little of everything, from laying plastic mulch and planting to cutting, making bouquets and selling. I was even the chief bucket washer! My back hurt a lot during the first month or so, but I actually got used to it as the season went on. I took a lot of pleasure in seeing the plants flower throughout the summer...and even more when people bought them.

5. As for my daughter working this past summer, she put in some hours, but not nearly enough. So, I told her she gets no more monthly allowance. She would have to work more next summer and save up her money. Sounds like a typical teenager, doesn't it? She likes to put bouquets together much better than cutting in the field.

6. This new business has definite potential to grow. The key will be our product mix, retail outlets and Mother Nature. Boy, did Mother Nature throw us a curve this year! Right after Mother's Day, we were ready to start transplanting, but the rain started and kept going for the next month. We were two weeks late with our first planting and one week late with each of the next two plantings. We could not start cutting until the week after July 4th. The field was finished by the end of September.

PLANNING FOR NEXT YEAR

Now here's what I learned and will do different next year:

1. We need to find an easier way to transplant through black plastic mulch. I heard about a

tube-transplanter that will do the job; I just need to find out who makes it and buy a couple.

2. Weed control between plastic mulch beds is a big job! We may need to use some herbicides next year.

3. I was all set for a warm, dry year, using raised beds, drip tape and black plastic mulch. What I couldn't handle was all of the rain. Have you ever tried planting when your feet sink into mud up to your ankles? We ended up with an unusually cool summer, resulting in a lot of rust and powdery mildew. Good thing we used plastic netting to hold up the flowers.

4. We need to buy a mist blower to spray the field easily. We used Japanese beetle traps very well, but the cucumber beetles were another matter. They devastate flowers before they even open. I want to use safe chemicals because we handle the plants and flowers a lot, but we need a better way to apply them. Backpack sprayers are not the way!

5. We need to make another planting around July 4th to have enough flowers right up to the beginning of October.

6. People can't seem to get enough fresh sunflowers! We will plant more next year in successive plantings.

7. I need to raise my prices some next year. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

8. New flowers and colors will attract more customers. We will increase our product mix with some perennials, dahlias, lilies, sweet peas and more colors of snaps and sunflowers.

Well, there you have it — a brief synopsis of my first year with field-grown summer cut flowers. I met more people in my local area this year than I have in the 20 years I have lived here. I felt more anchored in my community, got more exercise (although I still need a lot more), found cutting flowers in the field and putting bouquets together to be quite relaxing and enjoyed the interaction with customers at the markets. I can't wait until next year! GPN

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