

## lessons learned

# Summer Cut Flowers for Fun and Profit

Nearly four years after starting Country Fresh Flowers, Roger Styer recounts the successes, calamities and lessons learned from his past two years in business.

By Roger C. Styer

It seems that everywhere I go in my travels around the country, someone asks about how my summer cut flower business is doing and whether my daughter is still working for me. I had written in *GPN* about the business I started back in 2004, and I updated it the following year. But I haven't written anything on it for the past two years, so I figured now would be a good time.

So, to put it briefly, the business is getting better but still isn't profitable, my daughter is not working for me anymore — she is a freshman in college — and I am learning a lot every year. You would think that after four years, I could turn a profit, but it's not that easy, especially when you are developing a new business that is very seasonal, but some of you already know that!

For those of you not familiar with what I am writing about, I set up a summer cut flower business, Country Fresh Flowers, in 2004 in St. Charles, Ill., with the intention of selling field-grown cuts at farmers markets and to retail florists. I really was looking for something to get me back into growing flowers, occupy some of my down time from consulting and get some exercise. Oh, and to give my daughter a way to earn some extra money. Those things are still important to me, although my daughter had other ideas.

### Growing and Selling

We grow annuals, perennials and lilies in crates for harvesting from end of June to end of September. Annuals are grown on plastic-mulched raised beds with drip tape underneath. Everything is grown on drip except for some direct-seeded crops such as broom corn, ornamental wheat and millet. We transplant annual plugs starting around Mother's Day with a planting tube called Pottiputki (Figure 1, top right) directly through the plastic mulch covered with netting, which provides our spacing and can be raised later to keep flowers off the ground. We have four Pottiputki tubes, which we could never do without. No more bending over or crawling on our hands and knees to transplant! Even sunflowers are grown as plugs and transplanted with a Pottiputki. Perennials are transplanted through a weed mat in which we burn holes and plant with a bulb planter. Lilies are planted in bulb crates and grown in a greenhouse covered with poly or shade curtain. I don't have hoophouses available to me to extend the season, as I am only renting the land and greenhouse space. Flowers are cut about five days a week, processed and put into a cooler set at 38-40° F (Figure 2, bottom right).

I have two basic sales outlets. Most of the flowers are sold at two upscale farmers markets called French Markets, named for the way they are laid out. We make up bouquets in various sizes and sell other cuts in bunches or singles. I handle all of these weekend markets (Saturday and Sunday) for 14 straight weeks (Figure 3, page 38). Our mid-week sales are to three retail florists in the area. What we sell to florists are bunches, not bouquets. Any flowers in the cooler longer than two to three days are given away or dumped. So, now that you know the basic business, let's get into the updates from 2006 and 2007, as well as what is planned for 2008.

### 2006: Expanding Along a Steep Learning Curve

We increased production about 50 percent in 2006, with a new piece of ground cultivated for more annuals and lily production more than doubled. We also started to establish some perennial areas. Successive plantings



Figure 1. Transplanting plugs with a Pottiputki planting tube.



Figure 2. Cuts just in from the field, waiting to be processed and placed in cooler.

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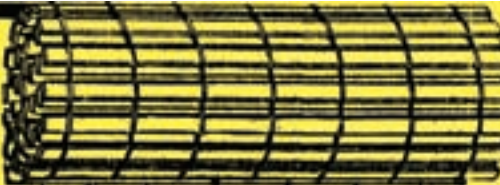


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Figure 3. My booth at the big Saturday French Market.



Figure 4. Note the signage and the portable stand for large bouquets.

were made every week for lilies, every two weeks for sunflowers and four plantings three weeks apart for main annual crops such as snaps, zinnias, celosia and lisianthus. This increase in production naturally resulted in too many cut flowers becoming ready too close together. We couldn't sell them all and had to give a lot of away or dump them.

With the increased production came more expenses, both in labor and supplies for more lily bulbs, soilless mix for crates, new buckets for market, plugs, mulch, drip tape and weed mat. I also bought a mist blower to use for spraying the field quickly when needed. We were so busy trying to keep up with cutting and planting that the weeds got away from us late in the season. Needless to say, we did not make a profit in 2006.

However, we did make some significant improvements from 2005. The new piece of ground we cultivated and put into production worked out very well. We established some perennials, with room for expansion. And we developed interest in fresh-cut lilies, but I needed to raise my prices to be profitable with this crop. The new buckets we used for markets worked out well for transporting and displaying. You can put more into them and store them more tightly together for transporting flowers to market, and you can stack them for different heights for displays.

Our markets continued to develop, with focused sales to retail florists and a better location at the big Saturday French Market. But being the new kid on the block, it takes time to get more customers at the markets. Our new location

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Figure 5. White-on-black plastic mulch beds with netting.

right by a main entrance at the big French Market really helped with sales. Customers see you first and can easily find you again. And our developing customer base really liked our products and was becoming a loyal clientele.

Here is what I learned in 2006:

- We produced way too many annuals with not enough market to sell them, so I needed to cut back production in 2007.
- I needed to drop dahlias. They took up too much space with not enough yield.
- I needed to put drip tape and netting on lilies grown in crates to make life easier later on.
- I needed to concentrate more on weed control after learning how many seeds some weeds can produce and how long they can live in the soil.

### 2007: Remain Open-Minded in Unexpected Circumstances

I had to make a tough change in my philosophy about how much to produce. I decided to cut back my main annuals by 30 to 40 per-

cent and lilies by about 15 percent. I transplanted sunflowers every week, rather than every two weeks, to smooth out yields. I also took one of the three pieces of cultivated ground out of production and put in a cover crop to help with weed control, erosion and getting organic matter back into the soil. From this idea, I will rotate plantings each year to ensure better weed control and soil improvement. We introduced a number of new crops, which helped with making bigger bouquets with a higher price point as well as introducing new flowers to our customers. We also planted more perennials.

You know that old saying, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry"? Well, that is what happened with production in 2007. We ran short on some crops because of poor seed quality and not enough plugs. Then we ran out of white-on-black plastic mulch and had to use black plastic mulch. That resulted in losing a number of transplants when heat on the black plastic burned them up.

A really bad rainy period in the latter part of August wiped out the snaps, blew over many crops

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on which the netting had not been raised high enough, blew over the sunflowers, waterlogged the fields for about three days, kept us from transplanting most of the late sunflowers, and brought on a pestilence of bloodthirsty mosquitoes for about three weeks. The rain-

fall and humidity caused Botrytis on lilies, resulting in losses and reduced quality on some varieties and plantings.

And finally, some of the new crops that were planted did not produce the yields expected. All totaled, I calculated a 30-percent

loss in annuals and sunflowers and 20-percent loss in lilies — on top of the 30-percent reduction in planting of annuals from 2006. We did not have enough flowers to cut for most of September, and we didn't have enough bouquets to satisfy the markets earlier.



Sales at the two French markets were up from 2006, but I kept running out of sunflowers and bouquets too early because of the loss in production. We did introduce a bigger bouquet for \$15 that sold well, in addition to the pint and quart Mason jar bouquets, which is my niche in the markets. Lily sales were up, but I still had too many. This is a crop you really do not want to give away or dump. I did get my price up to \$3 per stem, sold in bunches of five. Sales to retail florists were down from 2006, and I attribute this to the losses in production, especially for September.

My labor costs were down because we did not need as many people because of the reduction in planting. But I did give some of my best girls a financial incentive to control weeds in each field, as well as a commission for retail florist sales — they handle sales when I travel during the week, and I think they are better at it than I am! For field cleanup at the end of the season, I bring in some workers from a temp agency. Expenses were down a little from 2006 because of fewer lily bulbs and plugs, but this wasn't enough to make a profit!

Even with all the production problems in 2006, some significant improvements were made. The weekly plantings of sunflowers did give a more consistent supply, but we need to get each planting into the ground no matter what. Reduced production did lower the expenses, but at what cost to sales? The larger bouquets sold well. Maybe there is a market for an even larger bouquet in the \$25 range. Better focus on signage at the markets really paid off with the customers (Figure 4, page 38). We planted more perennials, which should help us in 2008. And new crops such as asclepias pods, broom corn, purple millet and amaranthus were easy to grow, popular and profitable.

Every year provides lessons to be learned if you are open-minded. I am looking at new crops more closely before putting them into production. They need to be subjected to a cost-versus-yield analysis first, and re-examined after the production year is done. For instance, I will not plant static,

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Figure 6. Deer fencing around the sunflower field. This is a low voltage polytape fence charged with a solar battery and baited with peanut butter.

delphinium or eucalyptus again. We also ripped out some perennials that had died or were not producing the way we expected even after two years. We will increase perennials that flower more in the summer and fall months. All annuals will now be planted on white-on-black plastic mulch (Figure 5, page 39). I will put together a better successive planting schedule of successful crops so we do not run out of flowers in September. I need to cut back on lilies about another 15 percent to make sure I can sell out. I also found out that deer love phlox and a few other perennials, so I need to put deer fencing around the perennial and sunflower fields (Figure 6, above). And, finally, I need to promote more the "Locally Grown and Fresh Cut" message at the markets. Customers really appreciate that!

#### 2008: Plans for the New Year

Here is what I want to do in 2008. Make sure all of the planned crops have sufficient numbers in the field and produce as expected. We are also going to plant more perennial. The goal is to get more consistent production throughout our three-month selling season. We are also going to plant tuberose in crates rather than in the field. This will make it much easier to save the tubers at the end of the season. We want to produce more bouquets, as well as some larger bouquets, for the markets. I also want to develop more mid-week markets, such as a bouquet service for local businesses such as banks, restaurants and offices. Some expenses will be reduced, because we're planting fewer lilies and bulb costs are down this year. But I will have some higher costs for plugs and more perennials. Hopefully, this is the last year I'll need to plant perennials and can just divide them as needed in the next few years.

The goals for 2008 are to break even, have fun, get some exercise and make a lot of people happy with locally grown, fresh-cut flowers. You would be surprised at how

many people are so pleased with bouquets that have some fragrance. There is no better feeling than seeing the faces of customers light up when they see what we have to offer, and how well the flowers last for them. I give away single stems of lilies or sunflowers to young and

old alike, just to see them smile! I didn't start this business to get rich but to make me feel better. And in the process, I am making others feel better as well. **GPN**

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