

Specialty Cut Flower Production: Meet the Markets

Marketing is probably the most important thing for you as a specialty cut flower grower, after you have figured out the growing techniques, unless you are growing flowers just for your own enjoyment and not seriously seeking profit.

As with any produce business, you must have good market knowledge to run a good specialty cut flower production business. A good cut flower business is less about how many stems of zinnias you could grow or how many bouquets you could make but more about how much profit you could get from the things you produce.

Specialty cut flowers are “special” in that they normally have shorter postharvest lives than roses, carnations, and chrysanthemums and do not tolerate long distance shipping conditions. Their marketing channels are very similar to those for locally-produced vegetables. Cut flowers can be sold by stem, bouquet, or a combination of the two in the market, and there are success stories in each category.

One or more of the following market channels is often available, and you definitely need to research markets in your area before sowing seeds or ordering plugs, liners, or bulbs of any kind.

Farmers Market Sales

Farmers markets can offer better prices for cut flowers than the market channels toward the bottom of the list below, and they are more suitable where the shoppers are willing to pay higher prices. A farmers market is a great way to establish direct personal contact with customers who buy your flowers, which could lead to the other forms of sales. Display is a key for sales at the farmers market, so top-quality

flowers and high postharvest standards are almost equally important.

Direct On-Farm Sales/ Cut-Your-Own

Once you establish a relationship with customers through the farmers market or other events, some customers might be interested in visiting the farm where you grow the flowers, buy the flowers directly from the farm, and/or cut their own flowers directly from the field. Or if the farm is close to traffic, the beautiful flowers will invite people to the farm, where direct on-farm sales and cut-your-own can bring you some cash flow. Cut-your-own is very similar to the pick-your-own concept in selling vegetables and fruits. For growers focusing on vegetables, flowers can add to the draw of getting customers to the farm.

Customers can select what they want directly from the “mother plant,” and that saves you time in cutting the flowers, processing through postharvest procedures, and transporting the flowers. You may have concerns in dealing with customers directly on their farms. One is that this takes away from your time producing. Another concern is the customers might not know the proper way to cut the flowers and damage the “mother plant” or the other plants. You can set up a minimum purchase limit to offset your time, based on whether a guided tour is needed and the potential damage.

Special Events Sales

Special events include weddings, funerals, grand openings, graduations, retirement receptions, and various parties. You can be



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responsible for all the flower arrangements for the events or just parts of it. Flowers would be the main component for special event sales, and this provides opportunity for value-added components.

Sales through Community-supported Agriculture (CSA)

CSA is more common in vegetable sales, where customers subscribe to the grower in advance to buy a “share” of the grower’s product and then receives produce every week during the harvest season. For flower CSAs, growers offer various programs to meet consumer demands. Examples are a bouquet subscription, subscription by stems, weekly subscription, biweekly subscription, holiday subscription, and special events subscription. Since high dollar value of cut flowers can justify use of high tunnels or greenhouses for winter production, you can also offer spring, summer, fall, and winter flower subscriptions. Flower CSA can also be combined with vegetable CSA, where an extra fee is charged to the subscribers when they want to have flowers in their weekly produce boxes.

Online Sales

More and more people have used or prefer online shopping, especially the young population. Websites or online stores would attract the attention of online shoppers, potentially from anywhere. The website could also serve as an advertizing tool to attract local consumers and enhance local markets. Since the potential customers for online sales could be from anywhere, shipping might be one of the major concerns. As stated earlier, specialty cut flowers are not as tolerant of harsh shipping as carnations or roses. Extra postharvest care must be taken before the flowers reach the consumers.

Retail Florists

Retail florists buy wholesale flowers and then resell to the final consumer. Directly dealing with the final consumer, they have a better feeling of what the consumer wants and better appreciation of the quality of flowers. You can expect to be paid at least the price from the

wholesale florists, because there will be no shipping and handling cost, which is normally paid by the retail florists when they buy from wholesale florists. In addition, retail florists can receive much fresher flowers from you than from the wholesale florists.

Grocery Store Sales

More and more grocery stores, especially natural food stores, are seeking local produce, including flowers. Two ways to sell flowers to grocery stores are directly and indirectly. To sell directly to the store, you would deliver flowers to the store, where the flowers will be displayed and sold. “Indirectly” means flowers are shipped and delivered to the store’s warehouse distribution center and then delivered to individual stores from the warehouse distribution center. You can get involved in arranging the flower display if you are selling directly to store. You can feature your farm logo and directions to the farm on the buckets, perhaps bringing in more on-farm business. Grocery stores normally mark up the price 100 percent, so you need to price your flowers appropriately. Some stores offer display space for growers’ flowers and take a cut (say 20 to 25 percent) of whatever is sold, instead of buying the flowers from the grower. In this case, you need to pay more attention to displaying and postharvest, such as using clean buckets, floral preservative, and keeping a distance from the fruits and vegetables that generate a lot of ethylene.

Wholesale Florists

Wholesale florists buy from wholesale growers and distribute to retail florists. They probably don’t offer the best price, compared to the market channels above, but it is a good way to move a huge number of flowers.

Further Reading

The Flower Farmer: An Organic Grower’s Guide to Raising and Selling Cut Flowers by Lynn Byczynski. Chelsea Green Publishing Co., White River Junction, Vermont
www.chelseagreen.com



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