



ADDING CUT FLOWERS MAY INCREASE PROFITS

Andy Hankins, Extension Specialist-Alternative Agriculture - Virginia State University

Reviewed by Chris Mullins, Virginia State University 2018

Vegetable growers who sell produce at farmers' markets, at roadside stands, to restaurants and to local supermarkets may find that they can bring in additional income by adding fresh cut flowers to the inventory of products they sell. A number of benefits can be gained from adding cut flowers to a vegetable marketing operation. Cut flowers add diversity. Customers at roadside stands and at farmers markets like to have many choices. The brilliant colors of a 1/4-acre plot of cut flowers growing beside a roadside stand certainly add visual appeal to potential customers coming down the highway. Restaurant managers need fresh cut flowers for table arrangements. They may be just as interested in buying flowers as they are in buying vegetables. All supermarkets now offer sleeved bunches of fresh cut flowers in glass front coolers in their produce sections. Those store managers need flower growers who can deliver sleeved bunches ready for sale. Many growers who interplant rows of cut flowers among rows of vegetables have noticed a reduction in damage to their vegetable crops by pest insects.

The flower crops often harbor populations of beneficial predatory and parasitic insects that control the pest species. Production of cut flowers requires many of the same resources as production of vegetables such as irrigation, transplanting equipment, cultivators, etc. The greatest conflict between these two enterprises occurs in the walk-in cooler. Vegetables like broccoli give off ethylene gas, which can cause severe damage to blooming flowers. A separate cooler space for harvested flowers is likely to be needed.

What species of flower crops should a beginning grower consider? Over 200 species of annual and perennial cut flowers are regularly sold in the national florist trade. This diversity reduces flooded markets but it increases confusion for vegetable growers who might like to try adding a few rows of flowers. Ten very good species for beginners to grow are zinnias, celosia, ageratum, sunflowers, rudbeckia, gladiolus, lisianthus, annual statice, yarrow and gypsophila. The following paragraphs describe the cultural requirements and recommended varieties for each of these ten species.

Zinnias are the easiest first flower crop that anyone can plant. An ounce of seed yields about 1000 plants. This species should be direct seeded in three sequential plantings - in the middle of April, in the middle of May and in the middle of June, for sales throughout the growing season.

Plant seeds three inches apart and thin the stand to one plant for every 9 inches of row. Rows should be four feet apart. Harvest just before pollen forms on the fully open blooms. Recommended varieties include Benary's Giant. Order seed in solid colors rather than the mix. The mix is 80% pink.

Celosia or cockscomb is another vigorous, easy-to-grow cut flower. A few rows of bright red celosia provide a brilliant roadside attraction. Set transplants out in the first week of May at a spacing of 18 inches apart in the row and four feet apart between the rows. Harvest from July through October. Three types of celosia that all sell well are crested (var. *cristata*), plumed (var. *plumose*) and wheat or spired form (var. *spicata*).

Recommended varieties are for crested form - Chief Mix, for plumed form - Pampas Plume and for spired form - Flamingo Feather. Harvest when the blooms show full color and before many black seeds form underneath.

Ageratum is a great filler species. Transplants should be set out in the first week of May and again in the first week of June, at a spacing of 12 inches apart in rows that are three feet apart. These transplants will soon grow into vigorous bushes two to three feet tall bearing medium blue flowers. The best variety to grow is Blue Horizon. Harvest when 50% of the blooms on a stem show full color.

Sunflowers continue to sell very well long after many predictions that their popularity would decline. Sunflowers should be direct seeded in sequential plantings on April 15, May 1, May 15, June 1 and June 15. Plant seed 6 inches apart, in rows that are three to four feet apart. Most varieties bloom 70 to 90 days after planting. The florists prefer to buy pollen-free varieties. One of the best is Sunrich Orange. There are about 700 seeds per ounce. Harvest when the petals are almost fully open.

Rudbeckia is better known as Black Eyed Susans. This plant is a perennial but it must be used as an annual for cut flowers because the quality of the blooms is greatly reduced after the first year of growth. Set transplants out in the last week of April at a spacing of 12 inches apart in rows that are three feet apart. By the middle of July will be three feet tall with 6-inch-wide yellow petals surrounding a black center. Indian Summer is a very reliable performer and other varieties are not as reliable. Harvest when the flowers are fully open.

Gladiolus is a flowering bulb crop that should be planted in the spring and summer in Virginia rather than in the fall. The corms should be planted 3 to 5 inches apart, 5 to 6 inches deep, in rows three feet apart. Each corm must be covered with at least 5 inches of soil. Glads will bloom about 70 days after the bulbs are planted so sequential planting must be done. To have an extended marketing season, plant gladiolus every two weeks from the second week of April to the last week of June. Harvest when the first few flowers on the spike are showing color. There are many beautiful varieties.

Lisianthus is a relatively new cut flower that has been very well received by the floral industry for beautiful, long lasting blooms on long sturdy stems. The flowers resemble roses but the plant has no thorns. Lisianthus plugs should be set out 8 inches apart, beside trickle irrigation in mid-April. Single rows may be spaced three feet apart. The plants will bloom throughout the month of July. There is usually another flush of blooms in mid-September. If the plants are allowed to winter over they will bloom again in June of the following year. Harvest when the blooms show full color but before they are fully opened. Mariachi is one of several outstanding varieties.

Annual statice grows very well above woven plastic weed barrier material used as a mulch to control weeds. An ounce of seed provides 10,000 plants. Transplants should be set out in mid-April, 12 inches apart in rows one to three feet apart depending on weed control method used.

The plants will bloom from late June through October. Harvest when 80% of the flowers on the stem are open. Annual statice comes in several intense colors of blue, rose, yellow, purple, white and sunset shades. There are many good varieties like the Excellent series. Any stems that are not sold as fresh cut flowers may be hung up and easily air dried.

Yarrow or achillea is a perennial flowering plant. There is usually no harvestable yield in the first year. The plant just grows and establishes a root system. From year 2 to year 5, yarrow provides vigorous production of beautiful composite flower heads on long sturdy stems. It is easy to grow. Set transplants out 12 inches apart in rows three to four feet apart in late April. In the second year, harvest will begin in early July and end by late July. A good variety of yellow or golden yarrow is Parker's. Cerise Queen is a popular red variety.

Gypsophila or baby's breath is another perennial that can provide about five years of production in a good location. Do not count on much yield in the first year. From year 2 to year 3, gypsophila provides production of 20 to 25 stems from plants nearly four feet high. Set transplants out 24 inches apart in rows 4 feet apart in late April. Gypsophila cannot bear poorly drained soil. It usually does well on top up on a hillside. Harvest when 50% of the flowers on a stem are showing bright white color. The best variety to sell as a cut flower is Perfecta.

Originally printed in Virginia Vegetable, Small Fruit and Specialty Crops – January-February 2003.

