



Growing flowers that are a cut above the rest

Garden is fertile territory for a dream job

By Kathy Van Mallekom
Tribune NewsServices

Money may not grow on trees, but sunflower and hydrangea blossoms can bring \$1.00 to \$5 a stem at a farmer's market.

That's what Lisa Ziegler has learned harvesting and selling fresh-cut flowers from her 1-acre garden in Newport News, Va.

When she married Steve Ziegler in 1985 and moved into his renovated family home a year later, she discovered the 60-year-old garden was fertile and ready to help her earn a living.

"My husband even came with two Troy-Bilt tillers," she says, laughing.

Her dream to earn a living working in the garden started in the 1980s when she began gardening. Her husband's third-generation home, however, presented the best business opportunity because it was already lush with herbaceous hydrangeas, daffodils and Lily-of-the-valley. Ziegler just had to decide what she wanted to grow and how to market it to customers.

Flower power

At first, she grew vegetables with a few flowers thrown in. Week after week, she took cut flowers to her grandmother's nursing home to brighten the dining hall. She was amazed at how one small row of plants kept producing so many flowers.

Then she ordered the booklet "The Half-Acre Flower Plan: Everything you need to know to grow \$10,000 or more," advertised in a magazine and read books on how to start a cut-flower business. She launched her business, The Ziegler Garden, in 1988.

Ziegler works her garden alone, putting in at least 40 hours a week. She has little time and patience for failed crops, so she grows only proven cut-flower varieties. She sells stems of everything from amaranths, peonies and larkspur to sunflowers, cockscomb and zinnias.

On Saturday mornings from now until Oct. 31, you'll find her hawking single stems and bouquets of assorted flowers and

fragrant herbs at the Williamsburg Farmer's Market on Merchants Square in Colonial Williamsburg, Va.

Before building a workshop-garage last year, she worked out of her kitchen and basement. The new two-story structure includes a cooler to keep cut flowers fresh until she makes her rounds, a large work area and space for her delivery van. It also includes a 30-foot square, window-lit room, where she germinates as many as 5,000 seedlings at a time.

What are the characteristics of a good cut flower?

"A vase life of at least seven days, preferably 10 to 14 days," she says.

"And one that does not shatter on your tabletop or drop pollen, has a suitable stem length and stiffness and, for me, does not require a lot of special handling."

Just like any other gardener, she has her favorites.

She prefers the Queen of Africa hybrid of Queen Anne's lace because its flowers open evenly unlike the lopsided blossoms you often see on the native plant.

The magenta flowers on Giant Gypsy Sweet William and dahlia-like blooms on Denary's Giants zinnias are other reliable cash crops in her garden.

If you want a rainbow of colors in your own garden, Lisa suggests you grow Colorado Sunset gerbera for flowers in pink, red, white and pale yellow. If you like good bugs to devour bad bugs on your plants, she recommends Coronation yarrow because it's a beneficial bug's slayer.

Other flowers she favors include Cramer's Plum Nigella with white flowers followed by burgundy pebs, Seabeam sunflower with golden-free petals and Indian Summer rushebeckia with giant golden-yellow flowers. Moolie House sunflower with dark burgundy blooms is one of her all-time favorites.

In addition to choosing the flowers to grow, Ziegler gives her plants tons of TLC. Her spring, summer and fall gardens are enriched with truckloads of compost she purchases from Newport News' recycling operation. During past years, she's filled 15 cubic yards of that compost into a new garden that's 30 feet long and 30 feet



Lisa Ziegler tends to her garden of Giant Gypsy flowers in Newport News, Va. Ziegler sells fresh-cut flowers at a farmer's market.

wide.

"Feed the soil and you reap the benefits," she says.

Well water flows through 400 feet of the drip tape it takes to irrigate each of her 20 flower beds. Black rat stakes control voles, and good bugs consume the bad ones. Next to voles and deer, thrips (destructive insects) are one of her main enemies, she says.

"Thrips love allium," she says.

Even so, she grows allium, especially the one nicknamed "dramatic." It's strong enough to withstand the winds of a hurricane and its blue flower heads are the size of a tennis ball.

Weed whacker

Her secret to weed control is to grow plants in thickly planted rows so they leave no bare spaces where weeds can get a foothold.

"Where there are holes, weeds will grow so just might as well plant those places in flowers," she says.

Each growing season presents its own challenges, even when Ziegler thinks she's got everything under control. Now, it's the cool wet weather. By Mother's Day she typically harvests 170 stems of larkspur but this year she was lucky to cut 10 to 15 stems by early May.

"They feel like they are in the refrigerator holding tight," she says.

When warm weather arrives and stays, she cuts non-stop, delivering 3,000 to 4,000 stems a week through October.

The business is hard work and not a get-rich-quick adventure, she says.

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Sources to get you started selling flowers

Here are some good plant and bulb Web sites and books to help you get started selling flowers.

■ Cramer's Peels Pottery: www.cramerspottery.com or 877-CRAMERS.

■ Johnny's Selected Seeds: www.johnnyseed.com; 207-863-1000.

■ Willowton Hill Gardens, hybrid-gia specialists, at www.hybrid-gia.com; 773-643-2400.

■ Geranium Seed Co.; www.geraniumseed.com; 800-353-4771.

■ Here and There's Bulbs: www.hereandtherebulbs.com; 877-001-2032.

Irrigation:

■ Drip Works drip irrigation catalog and pond supplies at www.dripworks.com; 800-523-5747.

Reference material:

■ "The Flower Farmer: An Organic Grower's Guide to Raising and Selling Cut Flowers," by Lynn Byczynski (Dimensions, \$34.95). The soft-cover book covers variety recommendations, handling, marketing, pricing and more.

■ "Specialty Cut Flowers," by Alan Armitage (Timber Press, \$35). Learn how to grow annuals, perennials, bulbs and woody plants for commercial cut-flower production.

■ "Field-Grown Cut Flowers: A Practical Guide and Sourcebook," by Alan Stevens (Dimensions, \$35). Book discusses marketing, production and management issues for a business based on specialty cut flowers. Geared for beginner and established growers.

■ "The August issue of Fine Gardening magazine tells how to grow big flowers from big-leaf hydrangeas.

For more information, visit the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers at www.ascfg.org and "Growing for Market," a newsletter for direct-market farmers, at www.growingformarket.com. Tribune NewsServices