

A Gardener Finds Riches Greater Than Wealth in Her Flowers

By KATHY VAN MULLEKOM
Knight Rider

Money may not grow on trees, but sunflower and hydrangea blossoms can bring \$1.50 to \$5 a stem at a farmers market.

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

When she married Steve Ziegler in 1995 and moved into his renovated family home a year later, she discovered the 65-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 heirloom hydrangeas, daffodils and lily-of-the-valley.

Ziegler just had to decide what else she wanted to grow and how to market it to customers.

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 gross \$15,000 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 1999.

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 snapdragons, peonies and larkspur to sunflowers, cockscomb and zinnias.

She was a regular vendor this year at the Williamsburg Farmer's Market on Merchants Square in Colonial Williamsburg.

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 10-foot-square, window-lit room, where she germinates as many as 9,000 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 Benary'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 yarrow 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 playpen.

Other flowers she favors include Cramer's Plum Nigella with white flowers followed by burgundy pods, Sunbeam sunflower with pollen-free petals and Indian Summer rudbeckia with giant golden-yellow flowers.

Moulin Rouge 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 nourished with truckloads of compost she purchases from the city's recycling operation.

During past years, she's tilled 15 cubic yards of that compost into a new garden that's 90 feet long and 50 feet wide.

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

Well water flows through 450 feet of the drip tape it takes to irrigate each of her 29 flowerbeds. Black rat snakes control voles, and good bugs

consume the bad ones.

Next to voles and deer, thrips are one of her main enemies, she says.

"Thrips love allium," she says.

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

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 you 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 570 stems of larkspur, but this year she was lucky to cut 50 to 55 stems by early May.

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

When warm weather arrives and stays, she cuts nonstop, 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.

"For those who love being in the garden whether it is 35 or 102 degrees or spending still mornings in the dew-covered garden watching a family of beneficial bugs hang out on a zinnia and watching the flowers grow, there is nothing else like my business."

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Lisa Ziegler
Flower vendor