

SUNDAY
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HOME & GARDEN

Business is
bloomin'

*Garden lover
makes money
growing flowers
to sell by the stem*



BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM/DAILY PRESS

Money may not grow on trees, but sunflower and hydrangea blossoms can bring \$1.50 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 1/4-acre garden in the Denbigh section of Newport News.

When she married Steve Ziegler in 1985 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.

On Saturday mornings from now until Oct. 25, you'll find her hawking single stems and bouquets of seasonal flowers and fragrant herbs 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

THIS JOB'S A SNAP.

Lisa Ziegler shows off some snapdragons from the 1 1/4-acre garden at her Newport News home. She started her business selling fresh-cut flowers in 1999.

PHOTOS BY JOE FUDGE
DAILY PRESS**QUEEN OF THE CROP.**

One of Ziegler's favorite flowers is the Queen of Africa hybrid of Queen Anne's lace. Its flowers open more evenly than the native variety.

Flowers

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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 of Newport News recycling operation. During the past 1 1/2 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 stem of larkspur, but this year she was lucky to cut from 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 from 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."

Kathy Van Mullekom can be reached 247-4781 or by e-mail at kvanmullekom@dailypress.com.

Good flowers to try in your home garden

Lisa Ziegler recommends these flowering plants:

■ **Zinnias.** Grow mildew-resistant Benary's Giants. Succession plant is the secret to having great zinnias all season. Sow seeds every month, so you always have a new crop coming in. Your first cut makes the plant. Cut the main stem at the bottom above the last side shoots; your reward is more long stems instead of a few short ones. Harvest flowers when they fully open.

■ **Hydrangeas.** The flowers have a long vase life if you treat them properly. They should be thoroughly hydrated before you cut them. Harvest in early morning; they refrigerate nicely until you need them. Hydrangeas should be planted in morning sun with afternoon shade; if the

blooms burn off before they dry on the bush, they are getting too much sun, not enough water or both. Harvest blooms at any stage; hydrangeas tend to rebloom after you cut them. To dry hydrangeas, let the blooms get papery looking on the bush; cut them and hang in a dry, dark place to finish drying. PeeGee is the best variety for drying.

■ **Ageratum.** Blue Horizon, 2003 cut flower of the year, offers a nice blue fuzzy flower on 24- to 36-inch tall stems, and looks wonderful with rudbeckias in the garden or on your table. The plant needs full sun and adores heat. Harvest when half of the flower opens.

■ **Celosia.** All celosias are nice. Cramer's cockscomb goes with Williamsburg colors and dries with little fading. Pampas Plume offers

feathery heads in red, gold and bronze. Celosias like heat, and tolerate drought once they are established in good soil. Harvest when the flowers are fully open and developed.

■ **Snapdragon.** Look for varieties called Rocket and Spring Giants. Plant them in fall and they will establish and hold through winter. When spring arrives, they will take off. Give them full sun and support in windy areas. Harvest when one to three florets open.

■ **Rudbeckia.** Indian Summer blooms all summer if blooms are harvested or faded ones removed. Plant rudbeckia in fall so it establishes before any dry growing conditions arrive. Harvest flowers when they begin to open.

■ **Sunflower.** Plant seeds every two to three weeks for a steady

supply of fresh flowers.

Sunflowers love sun and heat. To get seed snacks for the birds, grow the Mammoth varieties; dry the heads on the stalks and hang them in the garden during winter. For your personal pleasure, grow the shorter varieties that contain no pollen to mess your table.

■ **Yarrow.** Colorado Sunset is an excellent yarrow to grow as a cut flower or one to leave in your garden and enjoy. All yarrows withstand dry times, love the heat and provide habitats for beneficial insects. They prefer full sun and never complain about poor soil. Yarrow dries nicely; cut flowers when they are fully open, and hang to dry in a dark, warm place.

■ **Salvia.** Blue Bedder is a reliable perennial with gray-green foliage and spiky violet-blue flowers. It

looks like Victoria, but has taller stems and holds its florets longer. Blue Bedder blooms all summer if harvested or deadheaded (cut stems to the ground for more tall stems). It looks especially nice when paired with rudbeckia and ageratum in the garden or a vase. Harvest before florets open.

■ **Allium.** *A. sphaerocephalon* is often called "drumstick allium." Drumstick has tall 18- to 30-inch stems that withstand serious winds without support. The ornamental onion naturalizes, gives golf ball-size purple heads and dries nicely. *A. caeruleum* grows on 12- to 18-inch stems, and the ping-pong ball-size flower blooms in a beautiful blue. Harvest allium when it's open.

Kathy Van Mullekom/Daily Press

Cut flowers — where to get them, how to grow and use them, and more

FROM LISA ZIEGLER'S GARDEN

■ Purchase cut-flower bouquets from the Ziegler Garden at the Williamsburg Farmer's Market 8 a.m. to noon Saturdays now through Oct. 25. More than 20 vendors sell veggies, herbs, plants, baked goods and more at the market, which is held on Merchants Square in Colonial Williamsburg. Visit www.zieglergarden.com or www.williamsburgfarmersmarket.com.

■ Ziegler's flowers are also used by many local florists.

■ In spring, Ziegler harvests snapdragons, larkspur, lupine, sweet pears, bells of Ireland, delphinium, foxglove, peony, lily-of-the-valley, heirloom daffodils, bishop's lace, sweet William and dill. Summer and fall bring: hydrangea, lilies, lobelia, zinnias, sunflowers, cockscomb, celosias, ornamental peppers, artichokes and grasses, rudbeckia, yarrow, allium, salvia, marigolds, phlox, ageratum, sedum and fragrant foliage.

CUT-FLOWER TIPS

Here are some of Ziegler's tips on using and harvesting cut flowers:

■ Let the sun dry flowers before you cut them. If you harvest flowers wet with dew, they mildew quickly the next day. Spend your early



Lisa Ziegler checks zinnia seedlings in her small greenhouse.

Joe Fudge/Daily Press

bee pollinates an open floret, it falls off prematurely.

■ Cut peonies in the bud stage and you will enjoy the open flowers seven to 10 days.

■ Cut lilies before they open, about

■ Mix the foliage of good-smelling herbs — lemon or cinnamon basil — with cut flowers in arrangements for your home.

■ Plant early spring-blooming seeds, such as sweet peas and