

Business blooms in 1-acre garden

Grower turns her cut-flower dream into lucrative plot

By KATHY VAN MULLIGOM
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Money may not grow on trees, but subflower 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-acre garden in Newport News, Va.

When she married Steve Ziegler a 1996 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.

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 her best business opportunity because it was 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 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 grows only proven cut-flower varieties. She sells an assortment of stems, including snapdragons, peonies, larkspur, sunflowers, cockscomb and zinnias.

On Saturday mornings through Oct. 25, she hawks single stems and bouquets of



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Harvesting and selling cut flowers can be a lucrative business. Lisa Ziegler says the characteristics of a good cut flower is "a vase life of at least seven days, preferably 10 to 14 days."

If you want a rainbow of colors in your own garden, she suggests growing Colorado Sunset yarrow for flowers in pink, red, white and pale yellow.

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.

Ziegler gives her plants tons of care. Her spring, summer and fall gardens are nourished

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

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

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 85 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."

seasonal flowers and 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 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."

ADVICE

Tips for 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. Water and weed in early morning while the dew dries.
- **To harvest snapdragons, cut the stems at the ground** | This causes more new long shoots to develop. Snapdragons are harvested with only one to two florets open. If a bee pollinates an open floret, it falls off prematurely.
- **Cut peonies in the bud stage** | You will enjoy the open flowers seven to 10 days.
- **Cut lilies early** | Harvest them before they open. About 100 times you see the grooves color. The flowers will cooh and last two to three weeks.
- **Place cut flowers in clean buckets** | Fill with warm water and floral preservative.
- **Mix the foliage of good-smelling herbs** | Use lemon or citrus leaf with cut flowers in arrangements for your home.
- **Plant early spring-blooming seeds in fall** | These include sweet peas and larkspur.
- **Use aged compost** | Feed it to your plants.
- **Let flowers grow close together** | They will crowd out weeds.