



News & Views

for New Hampshire's Green Industry

August 2006

Diversify with Cut Flowers

Move over blueberries and apples!! Cut-your-own flowers seem to be sweeping customers with equal fervor. Vegetable and fruit growers are catching on to what florists have known for years - flowers sell. And sell well.

After seeing the packed room for the cut flower session of the 2005 New England Fruit and Vegetable Conference, I decided to literally stick my nose into other people's business and see if the cut flower industry smells as rosy as it sounds. The answer is "pretty much, for the most part."

At least that's what I gathered from the few farms around the state that are doing it. First thing I noticed is cut flowers are only a thought on most people's minds. Many small farms across the state have just planted cut flower gardens in the past year or two and are still working out the kinks. But people seem hopeful that the gardens will take off and the few bouquets that have come from them so far have sold well and for good prices.



At Rosaly's Garden in Peterborough, cut flowers are the third largest crop after tomatoes and muscugen.



At Spring Ledge Farm in New London Heidi Molton harvests sunflowers, one of the best selling cut flowers on the market.

Well-established cut flower growers have noticed an increase in consumer demand over the past four or five years. Consumer demand is measured in different ways. Some say the number of customers looking for cut flowers has increased, where others say the customer base seems to stay the same, but the price the market will bare has increased considerably. Of the cut flower growers I've spoken to, there seems to be a common number of 20-25 percent increases in gross profit from cut flower sales between 2004 and 2005. And 2006 seems to be even better. Sales are already up considerably and as I write this the season has just started!

The demand for cut-your-own flowers seems to be the fastest growing form of cut flower sales. Pre-cut bunches and bouquets are still the biggest sellers, making up about 75 percent of sales, but cut-your-own gardens are gaining in popularity. That's because cut-your-own flowers allow customers to use their own creativity to mix and match the perfect bouquet to accent their kitchen table. At Rosaly's Garden in Peterborough, customers have even wandered into the herb garden and started cutting for displays. The fine textured herbs add different shades of green and

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fresh scents to their bouquets. Consumers looking to cut and arrange their own bouquets will pay 9 to 12 dollars a pound on average. Larger, heavier stems like sunflowers are usually sold by the stem instead.

So is it just that easy? Toss in a few cut flowers and listen to the cash register ring? Not exactly. Cut flower gardens take a lot of time and effort. They are one of the most labor intensive crops a farmer can grow. Most cut flowers are annuals so they must be planted each year, preferably with black plastic mulch and drip irrigation. By mid summer, staking, deadheading and regular weeding are endless chores. Old bouquets don't sell and someone from the farm has to continuously cut fresh flowers, arrange the bouquets, and keep the displays looking fresh. Cutting must be done at least 2-3 times a week. It's important to have one person in charge of the cut flower operation who will get to know each flower and learn when to cut, how low to cut, what sells, what doesn't, and what makes a fashionable bouquet.

At Spring Ledge Farm in New London, Heidi Molton takes care of the cut flower garden full time from early summer to fall. She cuts flowers and makes bouquets; keeps flowers in the field supported and straight, and dead-heads as needed so the fields look almost perfect every day. Betsy Marshall oversees the cut flower operation at Rosaly's Garden where making prearranged bouquets takes up a full day three times a week. In addition to that, two people spend two full days a week caring for the plants, and that doesn't even include the mowing, which takes 16 hours a week! Most farms just getting into the business of cut flowers don't have the luxury of hiring extra labor. The more common arrangement for a typical New Hampshire farm is one grower, one hundred different crops.

Cut flowers are considered a luxury for most consumers and they don't exactly sell themselves. Growers are working hard to push those petals. Twilight meetings open to the community, stories in the newspaper and colorful signs are just some of the ways consumers are lured to the gardens. Pick your own



UNH Cooperative Extension is performing variety trials with *Eustoma* in high tunnels and in open fields in Durham and New London. Come to one of the Sept. twilight meetings to see the results.

gardens need to be consumer friendly with clean, well manicured walking paths and inviting signs. All of this takes time, effort, and money.

The cut flower garden doesn't end with the first freeze. Like any ornamental crops, staying current on the latest cut flower variety is important. Winters are spent flipping through seed catalogs and trade magazines to see what's new and what's hot. Growers experiment with new cultivars every year. Betsy tried over 10 new cultivars for 2006. So far she said Celosia 'Baybay' is looking like a great new addition. UNH Cooperative Extension is doing cultivar trials of *Eustoma* (formerly known as *Lisianthus*), a plant that has recently gained immense popularity in the trade. Despite the new and exotic varieties out there, sunflowers, snapdragons and zinnias remain the staples and consumer's favorites.

So does all this time, labor and energy really pay off? That's a hard question to answer this early in the game. A common comment from all cut flower growers, large and small, is that flowers attract attention. Whether it's a couple of bouquets at your booth at the farmer's market or a third of an acre of field grown flowers near your farm stand, they serve as a draw for customers, almost like a hook that

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jumps out and pulls people in. Cut flowers may or may not be a profitable crop by themselves, that really depends on each individual operation and how the flowers are grown and sold, but they do increase total sales at the farm stand or farm market.

Cut flowers can be a successful venture for those with the time and labor to put into them. They can be a specialty crop on their own or a good addition to your already established production mix. Those that have been in the business advise new growers to ask around, find out what works and what doesn't. Doing your research can eliminate a lot of labor in the beginning. And from what I've seen, in this business you'll want to save on labor in anyway you can. *Sadie Puglisi*

Dr. Paul Fisher Leaves for the University of Florida

Dr. Paul Fisher, Associate Professor in Plant Biology and Extension Specialist in Floriculture, left UNH for Florida in July this year. He and his wife, Rosanna Freyre, both accepted positions with the University of Florida in Gainesville in the Environmental Horticulture Department. Both Paul and Rosanna will be missed by our faculty, Cooperative Extension educators, and the NH greenhouse industry.

Paul had a split appointment at UNH, conducting research, teaching and advising students, and serving as Extension Specialist for greenhouse and floriculture. Paul had a strong commitment to serving the needs of the greenhouse growers in our state and beyond. He was innovative and constantly sought to provide cutting-edge research to meet these needs. We will need to employ the same innovation as we seek to address these needs in the future.

Unfortunately his departure coincides with a time of reorganization and budget deficits within the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (COLSA). We are all too aware of the faculty reductions that have left the horticulture program and the Plant Biology Department

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struggling to provide the coursework necessary to maintain a viable horticulture major for undergraduate and graduate students, even as the ornamentals industry has grown to become the strongest economic sector in New Hampshire agriculture.



In UNH Cooperative Extension, we remain committed to providing the best research-based information possible to New Hampshire growers. Several discussions with Paul prior to his leaving, other Plant Biology faculty, and industry leaders in the state have led me to conclude that we need to fill a new Greenhouse Extension Specialist position as soon as feasible and we will work to make that happen. *Juli Brussell*

Other Changes at UNH

Cheryl Estabrooke, administrative assistant for all the plant biology Cooperative Extension specialists, retired at the end of June after 39 years on the job! She and her husband immediately left for Alaska and points north, south, east, and west in their new R.V. We miss Cheryl's sunny disposition and wish her the best.

Fortunately we have a new admin assistant already up and running — Suzanne Hebert — and she is doing a fine job. After living in Alaska for a number of years, she's come home to New Hampshire and is thrilled to be associated with horticulture. In addition to providing secretarial and administrative support for six specialists, Suzanne supervises a work study student who handles most of the soil test processing and computer tracking. And in case you're wondering, the number of soil samples submitted from growers and homeowners last year exceeded the number from previous years when we had our own Analytical Services Laboratory!



Fall Events 2006



TWILIGHT MEETING - Flower, Fruit & Vegetable Research

September 14, 2006 from 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m. at the UNH Woodman Horticultural Farm in Durham. To receive 1.5 **Pesticide Applicator Credits** you must sign in by 5:30 p.m.

Free; for directions and information call 862-3200.

TWILIGHT MEETING - Cut Flowers

September 19, 2006 from 4:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m. at Spring Ledge Farm, Main St, New London.

Free; for directions and information call 796-2151.

FALL TURFGRASS WORKSHOP

September 27, 2006 from 9:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. at Gold Star Sod Farm, Canterbury.

Registration is required by 9/22/06. To register call 796-2151 and ask for Gillian or Sadie.

COLLECTING AND PROPAGATING NATIVE TREE SEEDS

September 20, 2006 from 4:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m. at the State Forest Nursery, Boscawen.

RSVP required. Please call Gillian Rapp at 796-2151 X 300 or gillian.rapp@unh.edu

GARDEN CENTER OPEN HOUSE AND ANNUAL SEMINARS

October 19, 2006 at Wentworth Greenhouses and Sunningdale Golf Club, Rollinsford NH.

Co-sponsored by UNH Cooperative Extension and NH Plant Growers Association.

Speakers and topics will include:

- **Getting the Most out of Advertising**

Sally Stitt of StarMedia, Inc.; followed by a panel discussion on advertising

- **Going Organic - products and advice for organic gardeners/landscapers**

Don Bishop of Gardens Are..., Marlborough, MA

- **Connecting Master Gardeners and Retail Garden Centers**

Rachel Maccini, UNH Family Home & Garden Ed. Center

- **Growing a Green Generation, Children's Gardening Activities**

UNH Child Development Center, (tentative).

Save the date! A program flyer will be mailed out in a couple of weeks...

NE GREENHOUSE CONFERENCE & EXPOSITION

November 1-3, 2006 at DCU Center, Worcester, MA. For more information call (802) 655-7769 or visit

www.nogreenhouse.org

This newsletter is a cooperative effort of the Ornamentals Extension Educators and Specialists at the University of New Hampshire. It is published quarterly. Its purpose is to inform and update industry members on issues and research relevant to the production, use and maintenance of ornamentals and turf in New Hampshire. Contributors for this issue:

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