



Profitable,  
Small-Scale



# Flower Farming

**WHEN LYNN BYCZYNSKI** first authored an article on flower farming for *MOTHER EARTH NEWS* back in 2002, she estimated that “an acre of well-grown and marketed flowers is worth approximately \$25,000 to \$30,000 in sales.” Fifteen years later, cut flowers continue to be one of the highest-grossing crops you can grow per acre. Utilizing small-scale, high-intensity production techniques, my farm, Floret, has been able to gross \$55,000 to \$60,000 per acre in good years, even when we’ve sold the bulk of our flowers at wholesale prices. By offering wedding flowers and design services, we’re able to include an additional \$25,000 to \$30,000 worth of value-added revenue to our farm each year.

But before you get too starry-eyed by these figures and start plowing under your corn to plant zinnias and cosmos, it’s important to remember a few key things. Flower farming is farming, and farming is hard work. It involves long hours, physical labor, and your net income (what you keep) is a far cry from the gross per-acre income (what you bring in) after you factor in all your expenses and time. But the benefits are many, including being your own boss, providing vital bee and pollinator habitat, working outdoors, and being surrounded by incredible beauty. And most importantly: making a living doing something you love.

Here at Floret, we have just 2 (yes 2!) tiny acres dedicated to flower production. Many of today’s most successful flower farms are what would be considered “microfarms” compared to the vast expanses of corn, wheat, and soybean farms that make up much of the farmland across large swaths of the country. Among my flower-farming friends, anyone growing flowers on more than 10 acres is considered one of the “big guys.”

In just the past three years, there has been a renaissance of new flower farms in the U.S. Virtually all of this new growth is taking root on farms with just a few acres in production. Unlike commodity crops, and even vegetables grown on a small scale, flowers are typically planted, cultivated, and harvested all by hand. Very little mechanization beyond field preparation is actually involved, which means production is more often limited by available labor, than by available land.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

To get high yields and large volumes on such little land, we utilize high-intensity production techniques at Floret. These methods involve significant investments in soil

Cut flowers are one of the highest-grossing crops per acre. Create a debt-free farm and surround yourself with beauty by following this expert advice.

By Erin Benzakein



## FLOWER FARMING RESOURCES

*Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden*  
by Erin Benzakein

*Grow Your Own Cut Flowers*  
by Sarah Raven

*Specialty Cut Flowers*  
by Allan M. Armitage  
and Judy M. Laushman

*The Flower Farmer*  
by Lynn Byczynski

*The Cutting Garden*  
by Sarah Raven

*Woody Stems for Growers and Florists*  
by Lane Greer and  
John Dole

Subscription to *Growing for Market* trade publication  
[www.GrowingForMarket.com](http://www.GrowingForMarket.com)

Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers  
[www.ASCFG.org](http://www.ASCFG.org)

health, season extension structures, such as hoop houses, and in weed-control fabric, tight plant spacing, and a finely-tuned succession-planting plan. Succession planting means that as soon as one cultivar is done blooming, we tear it out and have another crop ready to transplant in its place in just a matter of days. This way, we harvest two crops in one season from each bed, which significantly increases our overall production (read more about this growing technique in "Succession Planting: Growing Vegetables Year-Round" on Page 94). I like to say that we tend 2 acres but produce more like 4 acres' worth of flowers.

If you have a green thumb, have access to land with good soil, and have an outlet for selling seasonal blooms, then growing your own cut flowers can be a great source of supplemental income. It's best to start small and slow, as the learning curve can be significant. Flower farmers grow dozens, sometimes hundreds, of different cultivars, each with their own germinating, harvesting, and post-harvest handling requirements. Plus, the prices you can get for flowers vary greatly depending on where you live and who your customers are. There is a fine art to finding the right type of flowers to grow, timing harvests for specific times of the year, and selling to the right people for the best price. Flowers you sell at farmers markets are different from flowers you sell to wedding florists, for example. You might need a few seasons to sort this out, so be sure to factor in some extra time while you're getting the hang of it all.

## CUT FLOWER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BEGINNING FARMERS

Whether you want to grow cut flowers for pleasure, to attract pollinators, or for a potential side business, here are a few of my favorite go-to flowers that can be started from seed and are easy to grow across a wide variety of climates. There is a whole world of cut flowers to discover and fall in love with, but you must look beyond the short-stemmed bedding plants you'll find at big garden centers and go for cultivars with long stems and a productive growth habit. Search catalogs and read seed packets carefully to ensure that the variety or cultivar is good for cutting.

**Amaranthus spp.** An easy to grow, heat-loving flower that comes in a range of earthy colors and forms, including many that look like hanging tassels. I love using amaranth as a foliage base in our market bouquets and grow rows of it each year.

**Antirrhinum spp. (Snapdragons).** These beautiful, frilly blooms are highly productive, and they have long, strong stems, a lengthy vase life, and a lovely citrus scent. They're great in early-summer bouquets, and the more you pick them, the more they flower.

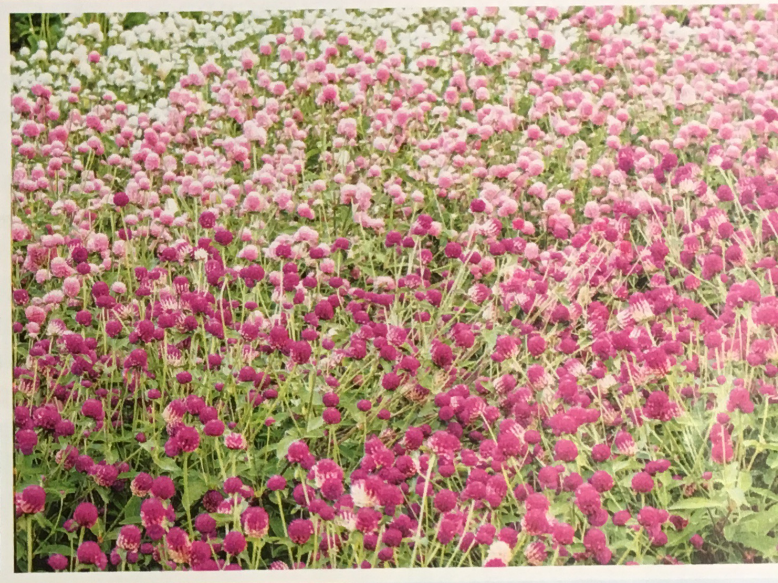
**Celosia spp.** These easy to grow, heat-loving flowers come in a wide variety of shapes, colors, and forms, including a crested cockscomb that my kids call a "brain flower" and spiky, plumed forms that are great accents for bouquets.

**Cosmos spp.** Of all the annual plants you can grow in your cutting garden, none is more productive than *Cosmos*. They truly are a cut-and-come-again flower; the more you harvest them, the more they bloom. A single planting will produce buckets and buckets of daisylike blooms for many months.

**Gomphrena globosa (Globe amaranth).** These summer darlings have adorable, buttonlike blooms that look great in bouquets. They thrive in the heat, and the more you cut, the more they bloom. Freshly harvested flowers can last up to two weeks in a vase and can be dried.

**Tagetes spp. (Marigolds).** These are some of the toughest, most abundant flowering plants you can grow. I often get 15 to 20 salable blooms from a single plant! These fluffy bloomers are a great addition to market bouquets.

**Zinnia spp.** Nothing says summer more than an armload of zinnias. One of the easiest cut flowers to cultivate, zinnias are a perfect first crop for beginning growers and are reliable, prolific producers no matter where you garden.



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Amaranthus and Celosia tolerate hot summers. MIDDLE RIGHT: Globe amaranth flowers can last up to two weeks in a vase. BOTTOM RIGHT: Snapdragons readily self seed and are a classic cottage flower. BOTTOM MIDDLE AND LEFT: Both Cosmos and marigolds share abundant blooms. MIDDLE LEFT: The author harvests 'Zinderella Lilac' zinnias from her farm.*





*LEFT: Dahlias aren't a long-lasting cut flower, but when picked fully ripe, they should last 5 to 7 days.*



*RIGHT: Erin picks 'Salmon Parrot' tulips at her farm in northwest Washington.*



*Erin Benzakein is the founder of Floret, a 2-acre flower farm in Washington's Skagit Valley. Floret offers training workshops and specialty seeds and supplies for small-scale flower farmers around the world ([www.FloretFlowers.com](http://www.FloretFlowers.com)). Her new book, *Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden: How to Grow, Harvest and Arrange Stunning Seasonal Blooms* is available on Page 92.*

### INVESTMENT DECISIONS

If you're ready to get serious about flower farming as a business and are wondering what you'll need to get started, I've outlined the investments that I made in the first three years. We've always run a debt-free operation, and growth has been slow and steady. Rather than buying on credit, we took the advice of a very wise farmer in our area and used the profits from the previous season to invest in infrastructure and equipment.

The first year, I started out very modestly with a wheelbarrow, a few basic hand tools, some landscape fabric for weed suppression, and a drip irrigation system. The second year, I invested in a small 15-by-40 foot seed-starting greenhouse and an old walk-in cooler that I bought on Craigslist from a restaurant that was going out of business. I couldn't afford the cooling unit that came with the cooler, so I used an air conditioner and CoolBot, which was a much more affordable option.

During the third year, we put up our first large greenhouse (20 by 60 feet), and bought an old delivery van. Each year, as the business grew more profitable, we invested in tools that save time and labor, including a tractor, 11 hoop houses, and an indoor workspace. If you don't have a ton of money to invest in the beginning, don't worry. It's OK to grow slowly and pay as you go.

### ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES

People always assume, after seeing pictures, that our property is a beautiful, magazine-worthy show farm. In reality, it's rough around the edges. Duct tape and baling twine are the threads that hold this place together. Although it's not as polished as I would like, we own everything outright, and that's worth its weight in gold.

Before you set off down the flower-farming path, it's important to gain an overall understanding of the floral industry and the general practice of growing flowers. I highly recommend joining the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers, a national organization dedicated to supporting commercial cut flower growers through education, marketing support, research, and community events ([www.ASCFG.org](http://www.ASCFG.org)). And if you haven't yet read any of the books listed under "Flower Farming Resources" (Page 40), then consider visiting your local bookstore or library to check them out.

There are few things more magical than standing in a field of flowers, especially when you've grown them yourself. Having the opportunity to own your own business, be surrounded by the beauty of nature, and do something both meaningful and fulfilling for a living is incredible. But with all of the benefits you'll gain from flower farming, you'll also find a whole lot of hard work and tough lessons to learn. The first few years will be the hardest as you try, succeed at, and fail at so many new things. While it can be scary to venture into uncharted territory, all of the lessons learned will ultimately serve you in the long run. So keep at it. The future is bright and filled with flowers!



Erin and her husband, Chris, have built a life that's both fulfilling and beautiful. They've made investments incrementally to avoid debt. Both the tractor (right) and hoop houses (left) were purchased with income from the previous year's sales. Landscaping fabric (top left) cuts back on the need for employees, and by planting bulbs in fall (top right) blooms arrive early each spring for an extended period of sales.

