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Cover Story

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Finding the Right Mix

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We often talk about what experiences garden retailers can offer to extend seasons and bring in new and return customers. In this industry trends issue, I wanted to explore something we're hearing more about: cut flower fields for a U-pick experience. It's not all the sepia-colored, dreamy experience for retailers, but you can offer that ideal to your customers with the right mix of plants and positioning. Here's how two retailers are providing the U-pick experience.

Left: The team uses the flowers from the field for arrangements to be sold in the shop, as well as for workshops in the binzebo.

Jenne's Garden Center, Myerstown, Pennsylvania

Jenne Martin is no stranger to a cut flower field—or a field full of crops, in general. She started out at Catalpa Grove Farms in Columbiana County, Ohio, where they had veggie fields and cut flowers for their farmers market. So when she opened her own retail location in Myerstown, Pennsylvania, it was natural for her to add a quarter acre cut flower field.

What she learned is the two customer bases and local offerings were very different. At her new store, there were lots of smaller cut flower growers offering in-season bouquets all around her—what Jenne also was offering in her retail shop. She had to differentiate to make the cut flower business work. And since it's not her core business (that's the annuals, perennials, houseplants and hardgoods that make up the bulk of sales), the cut flower business had to work for her when she needed it to, which was primarily in summer and early fall.

In her second year, she planted a simple sunflower field that drew in more customers, who then found the other cuts she offered.

“And they said, ‘Are you ever going to open it up so that we can cut our own flowers?’” she recalled. “I was just really surprised at how many people came for that sunflower field. And so I thought, ‘Yes, we’re going to give this a try.’”

Her team planted up the field with wide rows and relocated an old open grain bin they call the “binzebo” closer to the cuts field so they could hold activities and events in it, as well as store cut flower supplies. She stocked it with jars, clippers and full watering cans, and created a system where customers could go straight to the fields, get their cups, cut their flowers and pay. This next part may not work everywhere, but they also set it up so customers could come in the evening after hours, cut and pay by credit card via a QR code or cash in a cash bin.

“Last summer, we opened there in July and it is the first summer I made money on cut flowers. It was unbelievable,” she said, adding she’s expanding to a half-acre this year. She had events where groups started in the binzebo learning about cut flowers, then went to cut their own and return to the binzebo for a design lesson.

“It’s becoming more of a destination. You know, people think of you, you’re getting on people’s radar,” Jenne said. “And then where I wasn’t expecting, we did the sunflower field again and that was an even bigger turnout because people knew about it. Now we made some paths in the sunflowers and did a little sunflower maze.”





And while it’s always exciting to find new ways to reach customers, Jenne knew it had to be manageable for her small staff.

Top: This heavy rolling dibbler tool makes planting long rows much faster.

Bottom: The “binzebo”.

“The big thing is, I have a greenhouse that is my main money-maker in April and May, when you also need to be thinking about getting in your cut flowers,” she said. “So I had to streamline it where it was going to work for me.”

That meant using slightly raised bed rows layered with plastic to keep weeds down as much as possible, as well as using machinery to lay the plastic with drip tape underneath for irrigation. She also invested in a heavy dibbler tool that rolls down the row, cutting holes in the plastic to make planting easier.

Part of offering cut flowers is succession planting to ensure you have a variety of flowers throughout the summer and into fall. Something else Jenne noted is to plant different, fall-themed colors later to have those ready in late August, September and October.

And when it comes to getting started in the spring, she protects her labor by opting for plugs on many cuts versus starting her own from seed.

“It’s probably not the cheapest way, but again, I’m looking at time and I’m looking at efficiency,” she said. “Plus, I’m already getting liners and plugs from all these places.”

Once the rows are prepped and the plants planted in the ground, the biggest labor costs are staking support netting

for the cuts to grow through, keeping weeds to a minimum and potentially spraying for weeds and pests if needed, along with routine watering (or monitoring the irrigation situation).

The pricing structure works for Jenne's location, but obviously pricing is dependent on the local market. She charges $8 for as much as a customer can fit into a red Solo cup. The next size up is a Mason jar at $12 or for $35 they can fill a large black bucket.

With the success of the U-pick cut flowers, she's expanding into U-pick raspberries, starting with black raspberries this year and red next year.
"I feel like mine is not as conventional as some of the flower farmers out there. You just have to find something that works with your greenhouse," she said. "And that means I probably don't get my flowers planted 'til mid to the end of May, where some flower farmers might be, you know, getting them out in April. I just can't worry about it. It has to also work with the garden center."

> **Jenne's Cuts List**
> Sunflowers
> Zinnias
> Snapdragons
> Lisianthus
> Dahlias
> Ageratum
> Eucalyptus
> Celosia
> Gomphrena



Bemis Farms Nursery, Spencer, Massachusetts
Tina and Ed Bemis weren't planning on installing a third of an acre U-pick cut flower field at their destination garden center ... until Tina attended a two-hour presentation by Ball Seed's Cut Flower Specialist Dave Dowling at the Massachusetts Flower Growers Association's winter meeting.

"By the end of the talk I was hooked!" she said. "I saw that there was a market at that talk, and didn't want some young version of me sweeping in to my market and stealing a new opportunity."

Top: Tina Bemis in her flower field.

Bottom: Flower fans of all ages participate in the U-pick field at Bemis Farms Nursery.

Ed had already been growing pumpkins out in a field, and had purchased the machine needed to lay the plastic and drip tape for that, so they had some necessary equipment. Years of missed Valentine's Day sales spurred the idea to offer a subscription service where customers would pay in advance for a weekly opportunity to cut in the fields. For $100, they would get a cup and a pair of shears to bring back to the garden center for 10 weeks starting in mid-summer.

"We are closed [in February] because it's just too cold, but I knew we were missing an opportunity all these years," Tina said. "In an uncharacteristic moment of brilliance, the week before Valentine's Day last year we sent out an email and a Facebook post to sell subscriptions and we sold 35. So I went ahead and offered them again for Mother's Day and we sold another 55."

She worried she wouldn't have enough flowers to satisfy the demand of 90 subscriptions, but she had plenty. This year they're planning for an acre, which provides a beautiful field while still staying manageable for the team as they keep up with weeds and succession planting (along with the regular greenhouse and garden center). They also sell cut flowers at farmers markets and take them to the senior center for workshops. She recommended having multiple ways to sell overstock.

One aspect that's become an added bonus to the subscriptions is the amount of dried flowers that came out of it. The team there cut throughout and then harvest it all at the end of the season, drying what's left to use in workshops and to sell in the store.

"Last year, $14,000 worth of workshops used some of the dried flowers from the field," Tina said. "Don't get me wrong—there were other ingredients that went into those classes—but we have pretty much found a way to use every single flower."

Interestingly, customers didn't want to go out to the field and cut then come back and learn how to arrange them—

they just wanted to cut and go. They continue to learn about field logistics, too, like how far apart the drip irrigation tape needs to be to water in properly. Ed and Tina sow seeds in 72-cell plug trays so they're a little tougher out in the field from the start. Tina said if you use 128 trays, be sure to hand water them in the beginning to make sure they root in properly. The 72s might cost them a little more in the beginning, but reduces the labor needed out in the field later. Ed also purchased additional equipment, like a water wheel transplanter and a rock picker for the aisles in between rows.

They offer a mix of single cuts and cut-and-come-again varieties in the field, as well as a range of flower styles and shapes. But Tina has a theory that when customers think of cut flowers, they think of round, daisy-style flower heads. She sees that reflected in their sales numbers. But at the same time, Ed noted, you still have to offer the wide range.



Top: Ed Bemis works in the field, where they use plastic to reduce weed pressure and drip tape for irrigation.
Bottom: The dried cut flowers continued to produce revenue through workshops that ran from fall into Christmas.

"While people may not buy the 'weird stuff,' they like shopping at the place that has the weird stuff," he added.

Right now it seems like they have a great mix of offerings that attracts multiple generations of customers to enjoy time in the field and go home with a cupful of beautiful blooms. **GP**

> **Tina & Ed's Cut Flower List**
> Zinnias
> Sunflowers
> Lisianthus
> Bells-of-Ireland
> Marigolds
> Amaranthus
> Gomphrena
> Tall Ageratum
> Callistephus
> Solidago
> Gladiolus
> Limonium
> Calendula
> Nigella
> Centaurea
> Salvia
> Rudbeckia
> Helichrysum
> Hydrangea