



Flowers a budding ag crop



Retail
Nell Luter Floyd
Guest columnist

Madison woman shares advice, insight

Donna Yowell considers cut flowers a budding agricultural crop for which Mississippi could lead the nation. • “Eighty percent of flowers sold in America are imported and 90% of what is imported can be grown in Mississippi,” said Yowell, a Madison resident. • About two and half years ago, she founded Flower Growers of Mississippi to encourage individuals to grow cut flowers, distribute seeds and bulbs when available and provide free training about growing and harvesting flowers as well as marketing and managing the business aspects. **See FLOWERS, Page 2U**

Donna Yowell of Madison founded the Flower Growers of Mississippi to encourage individuals to grow cut flowers and to provide education on the topic.
NELL LUTER FLOYD/SPECIAL TO CLARION LEDGER

Flowers

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Earlier this year, the organization registered with the Secretary of State's Office as the Mississippi Cut Flower Growers Cooperative.

"We turned it into a cooperative so we could provide services for flower farmers and be able to sell together as a cooperative," Yowell said, who views the cut flower industry as a way to create jobs in rural communities, provide job training and get more women involved in agriculture.

In the garden located next to her home in Madison, Yowell grows a variety of blossoms from gladiolas to cockscomb celosia, dahlias to zinnias and more.

Yowell's garden is not a Martha Stewart picture of perfection but a demonstration garden.

Yowell shows that flowers can be planted straight into the soil without the need for investing in raised beds, that it's OK to grow flowers and landscape plants in containers of various sizes and that recycled items such as the shipping pallets paired with cattle wire that she used to create a fence can be used in practical ways in a garden.

Those are just a few of the lessons to learn from walking through Yowell's garden.

Have a flowerbed or property? There's income potential

Mary Carol Patrick of Canton recently paid a visit to Yowell and discussed gardening.

"I've learned so much from Donna," said Patrick, whose family grows corn, soybeans and cotton. "I've been growing sunflowers and zinnias. My mother loved flowers. My grandmother loved flowers."

Yowell understands the cut flower industry from several viewpoints.

A 1979 graduate of Mississippi State University with a degree in horticulture, she owned the Flower Market on Old Canton Road in Jackson for 15 years.

"I recognized then that we could grow the flowers here that we imported," she said.

As director of the Mississippi Urban Forest Council, she has worked with Bloom Town Mississippi, a program to teach city leaders how to put color in



Donna Yowell's garden in Madison is one she uses to teach lessons such as how to grow cut flowers, no-till gardening and repurposing items for practical uses in a garden. PHOTOS BY NELL LUTER FLOYD/SPECIAL TO CLARION LEDGER

their communities with trees, shrubs and flowers.

Yowell decided to invest time in teaching others how to grow cut flowers and promoting the industry because of its potential economic impact.

"People are looking for something they enjoy and can do at home," she said. "We know where our food comes from but the general public doesn't know where their flowers come from."

Almost anyone with a flowerbed or even more property has the potential to make extra income by growing cut flowers and there's no need for heavy equipment, expensive infrastructure or a greenhouse, she said.

The initial investment requires preparing the soil and purchasing seeds, she said. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service can often help with some resources, she said.

Planning is important so that a grower has something to sell year-round, Yowell said, explaining that it requires planting a diverse mix of bulbs, seeds, perennials, annuals and landscape plants.

The cut flower industry is not the same as the nursery business.

"The nursery business is potted plants and landscape plants and that's well established in Mississippi," Yowell said. "This is growing specialty cut flowers."

The Association of Cut Flower Growers estimates that a producer can make up to \$100,000 profit off 2 acres, she said.

Cut flowers are the highest dollar yield per stem – an average of \$3 per stem -- compared to any other crop in Mississippi's history, she said.

Several avenues for sales

The markets for cut flowers include local farmers markets, florists, restaurants, offices, event planners, churches, grocery stores and convention centers.



An arrangement created by Donna uses flowers from her garden.



Yowell, left, discusses gardening with Mary Carol Patrick.

Another outlet for growers is to establish a pick-your-own operation.

Flower growers have a presence on Saturday at the Mississippi Farmers Market on High Street. They sell individual stems, arrangements ready to purchase and will help a shopper who brings in a vase select flowers and arrange them, Yowell said.

Flower growers in the cooperative recently provided all locally grown flowers for a wedding in Jackson, she said. Flower Cottage Farm in Madison, Hope Blooms in Brandon and Lady Laura's Garden in Pickens grew the blossoms.

Laura Lee Leather of Lady Laura's Garden attended hands-on workshops sponsored by the Mississippi Flower Growers and learned how to prepare the soil and make the most of a short space.

"I'm very small in comparison to other growers," she said. "My garden is all around my home whereas some of the flower growers have acres to plant, but in a small space you can grow a lot."

Growing cut flowers fits with her business, Triple L Services, LLC, which includes freelance writing and speaking

to people about the art and etiquette of taking team, Leathers said.

Learn more about growing flowers

Yowell encourages anyone with an interest in growing flowers to learn more about the Mississippi Flower Growers. Information about free classes offered via Zoom is posted on the Flower Growers of Mississippi site on Facebook.

"Someone can find Flower Growers of Mississippi on Facebook or email me at dyowell@aol.com and I'll add them to the newsletter list," she said. "The two ways we communicate are through Facebook and an electronic newsletter sent by email."

The onset of the novel coronavirus and supply challenges made it difficult for florists to receive flowers, and that proved to be good for Mississippi growers, she said. "We've had florists call and want to buy locally grown flowers," she said.

Just how popular are cut flowers? "Eighty percent of the population buys flowers," Yowell said.

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