Bedding Plants

Introduction

Hundreds of different annuals, perennials, herbs, and vegetable transplants can be grown and sold as bedding plants. In general the term ‘bedding plant’ refers to any plant that is produced and sold for planting in the landscape, garden, or large containers (such as patio pots).

A single commercial greenhouse business may produce as many as 500 different kinds of plants in the spring. Some of the most common ornamental bedding plants include begonia (Begonia spp.), geranium (Pelargonium spp.), impatiens (Impatiens spp.), marigold (Tagetes spp.), pansy (Viola spp.), and petunia (Petunia x hybrid). Tomatoes (Lycopersicon esculentum), peppers (Capsicum annuum), and cole crops (Brassica oleracea) are popular vegetable transplants.

Market Outlook

Bedding plants, especially flowering annuals, have proved to be a stable and growing area in the floriculture industry. Sales of bedding plants rose sharply in the early 2000s as the consumer demand for landscape and gardening plants increased. Average sales of annual bedding plants were $17.15 (wholesale value) per U.S. household, while sales of herbaceous perennials were $6.38 (wholesale value) in 2005. The economic situation in the 2000s has contributed to continued consolidation in the bedding plant industry, with fewer and larger bedding plant producers. Opportunities still exist, however, for mid-sized and niche growers committed to market research and analysis.

A major change in the way bedding plants are sold to retail consumers has been moving away from ‘packs,’ or trays containing 18 to 48 individual cells, toward bedding plants in 4-inch and 6-inch pots. The market for potted bedding plants has grown while landscapers are the only consumers still demanding packs in large quantities; even many landscapers also now prefer larger
plant sizes to produce more immediate impact in home and commercial landscapes. Hanging baskets and patio pots, especially those containing multiple species, have also increased in market share. These ‘instant gardens’ appeal to busy professionals and urban consumers with limited gardening space. Large containers frequently fetch a higher price relative to the inputs needed to produce them, thus giving the grower a better potential for profits.

Production Considerations

General production requirements
A heated greenhouse structure is necessary for producing most bedding plants for spring sales. Crops requiring short production periods may be produced in a cold frame, high tunnel, or in an unheated greenhouse. Plants are generally propagated from seed sown from late December to March, or bought in as rooted cuttings or seedling transplants (referred to as ‘plugs’) received February to April.

One major production decision facing new growers is whether to invest in the equipment necessary to grow their own plants from seed or to purchase transplants (plugs) from another producer. Growers who purchase transplants, rather than growing them in-house, are referred to as bedding plant ‘finishers.’ This is an option many small to medium growers choose. Growers who purchase plugs may still opt to produce some of the more easily grown crops from seed.

There are numerous commercial growing substrates available and there is no single best formulation for growing quality bedding plants. The choice of mix can depend on a number of factors, including grower preference, cost, and type of irrigation. Some growers, usually the larger established growers, choose to create their own custom mixes on-site. However, this requires expensive, specialized equipment.

Timing production properly to have a wide assortment of species ready when the market demands them is critical to profitability. Growers must carefully schedule each crop to make sure it will reach the desired stage of growth at the appropriate time. There are many resources available to help growers with this complex task. Reference books and extension articles are good sources of comprehensive information on bedding plant scheduling. The breeder or marketer companies that supply the bedding plant seeds and cuttings are good sources for variety-specific scheduling recommendations. All reputable companies will provide technical support to their grower customers.

Pest management
Greenhouse conditions that favor plant growth also favor the rapid build-up and spread of insects and diseases. Potential disease problems include damping-off, root rots, powdery mildew, fungal leaf spots, and impatiens necrotic spot virus. Common insect pests include thrips, aphids, mites, fungus gnats, shore flies, and white flies. Caterpillars can also be a problem in greenhouses with open sides. Prevention and careful monitoring are the keys to insect and disease control. Weed control under benches and around the greenhouse will also help reduce insect pests and disease problems; however, herbicides must never be applied in greenhouses when crops are present. Allowing the greenhouse to freeze in the winter will help prevent pests from overwintering. Growers must remember to drain all water lines in the fall to prevent damage to plumbing components in unheated greenhouses.
Post-production
Consumers expect flowering bedding plants to be blooming at the time of purchase. Proper post-production care is essential to maintaining a quality product up until purchase. Plants ready for sale should be kept cool and shaded from direct sun to extend their shelf life. Ideally, plants should be sold within 3 to 5 days after removal from the greenhouse.

Economic Consideration
The production of bedding plants can be a highly profitable venture, with gross sales as high as $10 per square foot of greenhouse bench space, or typically $500,000 per acre. However, this is a high risk business with significant start-up costs, as well as demanding labor and management. Initial investments include greenhouse construction, production system costs, and equipment.

The cost of a production-ready greenhouse, excluding land costs, can run from $5 per square foot for a Quonset-style poly house to more than $20 per square foot for glass panel houses. Production costs and returns vary greatly depending on crops grown, greenhouse size, production system, and marketing strategy. Producers should develop production cost estimates specific to their situation. Useful sample budgets for bedding plant production costs are available from Rutgers University.

Selected Resources

On the Internet
• Controls for Greenhouse Ornamental Insect Pests, ENT-421 (University of Kentucky, 2004) http://www.uky.edu/Agriculture/Entomology/entfacts/trees/ef421.htm
• Greenhouse Business in Kentucky – A Review of Crops and How to Begin a Business (University of Kentucky, 2002) http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/anderson/greenhousesinkentucky.pdf
• Selected Resources and References for Commercial Greenhouse Operators (University of Kentucky, 2002) http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/introsheets/GHresources.pdf
• Commercial Floriculture Information Center (North Carolina State University) http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/floriculture/
• Commercial Production of Vegetable Transplants, B-1144 (University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, 2010) http://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.cfm?number=B1144
• Floriculture (Purdue University) http://ag.purdue.edu/hla/lopezlab/Pages/default.aspx
• Greenhouse Costs of Production Budgets (Rutgers, 2008) http://aesop.rutgers.edu/~farmmgmt/GreenHouse/Greenhouse-Index.html
• Post-production Quality of Bedding Plants (Auburn University) http://www.ag.auburn.edu/hort/landscape/PostBP.htm
• Virtual Grower 3 (USDA-ARS) http://www.ars.usda.gov/Research/docs.htm?docid=22087

Books in print

Reviewed by Bob Anderson, Extension Specialist (Issued 2002, Revised 2006)
Reviewed by Rebecca Schnelle, Extension Specialist (Revised 2010)
Reviewed by Dewayne Ingram, Extension Specialist (Revised 2014)
Greenhouse bedding plant photos by Derrick Hammons, University of Kentucky

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