

Woody Cuts

Introduction

Woody cuts are portions of woody ornamentals used for floral or decorative purposes. These include foliage, flowering branches, fruit and seeds, as well as bare stems and branches. Numerous shrubs, trees, and woody vines can be grown commercially for these purposes. Cut flower growers may want to add woody cuts to their production line to diversify their products, expand their markets, and extend the floral season. Growers will need to be familiar with the different production and harvest requirements of a diverse group of plant material.

Marketing and Market Outlook

The demand for cut flowers has been increasing since the early 1990s. Woody cuts, which may be sold fresh or dried, have become a very popular facet of the cut flower industry. According to the 2009 Census of Horticultural Specialties, woody cuts accounted for about 25 percent of cut stem sales in Kentucky. With Kentucky cut stem production (both wholesale and retail) estimated by the USDA at less than \$500,000, there may be growth potential for producers expanding into these markets, particularly with direct retail sales. The floral market shifts as consumer preferences change. Growers must be willing to adjust their production to meet these demands, a challenging task when dealing with woody plants.

Marketing channels for woody cuts are essentially the same as those for cut flowers. Potential retail outlets include farmers



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markets, roadside stands, and U-pick. Fresh cut material can be sold either as individual stems or bouquets. Most farmers markets and U-pick operations close in late summer/early fall, so growers utilizing these markets will need to locate alternative channels for winter material, such as pussy willows. Some growers include cut flowers in their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription offerings.

Wholesale options include wholesale florists, supermarkets, garden centers, and craft stores. Hotels, restaurants, and the Internet may offer other marketing opportunities. Bundling woody cuts with a service, such as subscription bouquets or other regular delivery services, may be another way for growers to explore this market. Local growers will have the market advantage of being able to supply fresher plant material, as well as being able to provide the hard-to-find and difficult-to-ship specialty cuts. Growers should develop several different marketing avenues.

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Many florists prefer to purchase the bulk of their plant material from large west coast wholesalers that can fill orders several months in advance. However, as prices increase with the rising cost of transportation, more wholesale florists are becoming interested in a local product.

Small growers who are not able to supply a dependable quantity of standard floral material (and therefore unable to compete at this level) should instead concentrate on growing products that are unique, of local interest, and difficult to ship. One Kentucky entrepreneur makes the rounds to local retail florists with a van-load of whatever woody and herbaceous plant material she currently has available. Because her products are not the usual fare and she is targeting florists that enjoy creating original arrangements, this grower is able to sell her entire van-load on these excursions. Harvested cuts that are not the quality demanded by the floral industry are worked into bouquets that are sold at her local farmers market.

Production Considerations

Plant selection

A wide variety of deciduous and evergreen plant material should be planted to diversify the market offering and fill out the season. Consider a mix of the unusual along with the usual. Potential plant characteristics to consider include: native or adapted plant material; short time period from planting to harvest; quick re-growth after pruning or harvesting operations; good flower, berry or leaf retention; and long vase life. Maintaining plants that can be harvested at various stages of growth have the advantage of providing material throughout the various seasons of the year. For example, growers will want to be able to provide flowering branches in spring and summer; fall

foliage and berries in autumn; and colorful or unique bare branches in winter. Woody stems that can be forced to bloom are another way to extend the season.

Site selection and planting

Plants for woody cuts generally prefer fertile, well-drained soil, and full sun throughout the day. A number of plants, however, can be grown on marginal land or wet sites that are unsuitable for other crops. For example, pussy willow and corkscrew willow can be grown as filter strips between annual crops and farm waterways. A few crops, such as hydrangea, require some shade. Meeting each crop's specific cultural requirements will be necessary for a quality product.



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Soil preparation includes adding fertilizers and soil amendments prior to planting. Care should be taken to not over-fertilize plants since high fertility often favors vegetative growth at the expense of flowers and fruit. A source of water for irrigation is often essential to maintaining good plant health during production.

Field spacing will depend not only on the crop requirements, but also the size of the equipment used for tilling, mowing, and harvesting. Many growers plant double rows with paths between beds for field operations. A tight spacing of plants within the row can help produce longer, straighter stems in some species.

Pruning is often used to encourage the growth of long stems. Some plants should be cut to the ground during dormancy. It is important to know whether flowers are produced on the current or previous wood in order to determine the best time for pruning, cutting back, and harvesting. Some plants, such as holly, require a pollinator.

Pest management

Disease and insect problems will vary from host to host. Scouting can help the grower determine when and how often pesticides should be applied. Weed management is especially critical since competition from weeds can interfere with plant establishment and reduce the quality of plants. Black plastic mulch or landscape fabric applied to beds prior to planting will help reduce weed problems. Organic mulches, such as wood chips, can be applied before or after planting, either alone or on top of landscape fabric.

Harvest and storage

It may take from 2 to 5 years for a new planting to produce a marketable product. The proper stage of harvest will depend upon a number of factors including type of market, cultivar, distance to market, intended use, and plant stage desired.

Woody stems should be at least 18 inches long, but can be up to 7 feet long, depending on what the market requires. Flowering stems can be harvested anywhere from bud to full bloom. Some stems cut in late winter can be forced to produce flowers weeks ahead of their natural bloom period. Once harvested, flowering stems are placed in a bucket of water containing floral preservative. They should then be placed in a cooled area or cooler until sold. Floral preservative and refrigeration are essential to keeping flowers fresh, as well as extending their shelf and vase life. Although fresh, more pliable branches are often more desirable, some woody cuts can be dried prior to marketing.

Branches cut for their fruit, such as bittersweet, are generally harvested after the fruit ripens. Ornamental bare branches are generally cut when dormant. They can be dried and stored for months.

Labor requirements

Woody cuts production is labor and management intensive. Planting, weeding, and harvesting all require manual labor. Crops that flower all

at once will require the instant availability of additional laborers during harvest. Marketing, filling orders, and delivering to customers will place additional labor requirements on this enterprise.

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of nursery stock, plant establishment, and installation of an irrigation system. Additional start-up expenses can include plastic mulch or landscape fabric, as well as a refrigerator or cooler.

Two or more years of growth may be required before any volume of saleable material is harvested; therefore cost and return projections should include interest payments and maintenance costs from planting until harvest begins. Due to the wide range of potential woody plant materials and many marketing options, a generalized budget is not realistic. Contacting florists, floral wholesale firms, and other potential customers, as well as other woody cuts growers and grower associations, may be helpful in pulling together budget and marketing information based on the specific plants that will be grown.

Selected Resources

Books in print

- *Specialty Cut Flowers: The Production of Annuals, Perennials, Bulbs, and Woody Plants for Fresh and Dried Cut Flowers.* A. M. Armitage and Judy M. Laushman, 2nd edition. 2003. Timber Press. Portland, OR. 636 pp.
- *Woody Cut Stems for Growers and Florists: Production and Post-Harvest Handling of Branches for Flowers, Fruit, and Foliage.* Lane Greer and John Dole. 2008. Timber Press: Portland OR. 576 pp.

On the Web

- Extended Vase Life for Cut Stems of *Hydrangea paniculata* (University of Kentucky) <http://www.uky.edu/Ag/Cdbrec/vase%20life.htm>

- Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers
<http://www.ascfg.org>
- Growing Cut Flowers for Market (North Dakota, 2011)
<http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/plantsci/landscap/h1200.pdf>
- Field Grown Cut Flowers (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, British Columbia, Canada, 1996)
<http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/ornamentals/floriculture/fieldcut.pdf>
- Southeast Outdoor Cut Flower Manual (North Carolina State University, 2000)
http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/floriculture/manuals/se_cut_flwr.pdf
- Specialty Cut Flowers (Kansas State University, 1992)
<http://ksre.ksu.edu/library/hort2/mf1034.pdf>
- Woody Ornamentals for Cut Flower Growers (ATTRA, 2002)
<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/woodyornamentals.html>

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For additional information, contact your local **County Extension** agent