

## Top Ten Flowers at Brightflower Farm

### Practical Farmers of Iowa Session 2

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**Please feel free to email me with your questions. I apologize for not appearing in person to this conference and I regret causing any and all of you any inconvenience.**

--#1 seller at Brightflower Farm (BFF) Bouquets: We only sell our bouquets in cases of 10. We ship all of our product wet-pack. For our grocery stores, we describe our bouquet product as 9-11 stems, however they are in reality often many more. For instance: grasses are usually 3 stems per 1, small stemmed gomphrena are 2-3 stems per counted 1. All grocery store deliveries are a minimum of 2 cases. That may be 2 cases of bouquets or a case of bouquets and a case of another one of our products. Our mixed bouquets do not follow a formula other than we include a focal flower, fillers, color, lines, and textures. The finished bouquet is more about heft and feel rather than stem count. In 2014 and 2015 we delivered to the Whole Foods (WFM) Distribution Center (DC). I decided that it was not cost effective to deliver our product in that way any longer and in 2016 we went back to delivering direct to individual stores (DSD). When full cases are delivered through the DC they need to be boxed and a PTI label included on each case. PTI stands for Product Traceability Initiative. This label gives each store the ability to trace the origin of every case of produce delivered to it. We built an additional cooler, a coolbot, to house full boxed cases on pallets that were then transferred to a truck which delivered to the WFM DC. As many of you already know a coolbot, [www.storeitcold.com](http://www.storeitcold.com), is a little device that tricks an air conditioner to continually blowing cold air. With a good insulated box, the cool bot is a much less expensive alternative to the traditional floral cooler with an evaporator and generator. The coolbot does not work very well when it is cold outside however. Although some sales were lost because of the transition from DC sales to only DSD, profitability was gained in dropping DC sales.

--#2 Mason Jar Bouquets: We began selling mason jar bouquets in 2015. Each year I try to get to visit in person my best customers, just to touch base and say hi. In 2015 I was at my biggest WFM store and they had some pint mason jar bouquets sitting on a ledge. They were pretty nasty and I mentioned to the florist that we could do something like this, but what was the cost? She has always been forthcoming with information, she told me the price she pays and what she retails it for. I said I could certainly provide something far nicer for the same price and we now go through more than a full pallet of mason jars! They are excellent for using short or otherwise unusable stems, the customers can just take it back to their office and plop it on their desk, they have preservatives in the liquid media so the flowers last a week or so. Stores generally scatter the bouquets around their space including in other departments to increase visibility. We have been told that they sell out the same day! In 2016 we sold mason jar bouquets from early April through December. Our early ranunculus masons were tricky to fill since nothing else in nature was blooming or barely even leafed out yet. We used flowering branches, scented geraniums, rosemary, and anything we could get our hands on. All of our mason jar bouquets have a UPC label on a string tag and we sell them 15 per case.

--#3 Dahlias: Because of our location, surrounded by conventional corn and soybeans, we are inundated with the Northern Corn Rootworm in mid-August through frost. I figured out how to grow the dahlias behind the protection of very small mesh screen made by Greentek, [www.green-tek.com](http://www.green-tek.com). The growing surface dahlia house is completely covered in landscape fabric, we have 5 rows about 3' apart, plants are spaced at about 24". It is tight but highly productive. For support, each dahlia gets a T-Post or rebar then as the dahlias grow they are tied to the individual post. The entire house is irrigated with drip irrigation. We use predatory mites and minute pirate bug for aphid and thrips control. We made very close to \$10K on our dahlias last year. We sold in straight bunches of 5 stems per bunch and cases of 10 bunches. We sell them for \$9.95 per bunch, \$99.50 per case and we earned over \$3.00 per square foot within the dahlia house alone.

--#4 Ranunculus: Ranunculus is one of our top sellers, one reason being we can begin growing quite early when nothing else can grow and that we grow so many. Besides the fact that they are a high demand flower and our customers love locally grown product. We can get a higher price point than most of our other flowers: \$12.95 vs \$8.00 per 10 + stem bunch. We include them in all of our mixed products: bouquets, consumer bunch, and masons; there are multiple stems per plant, and now we have begun to save the propagation material so that the cost is significantly lower and we are increasing our stock. The ranunculus have a long harvest and because we stagger planting we harvest and sell ranunculus beginning April through May and into June. The stage that we begin cutting is a brightly colored bud. We try to cut before the flower is open and no longer cut flowers after pollen has begun to shed. We store in the cooler with holding solution and a CVBN pill and they hold for over 2 weeks. The plants are prone to aphids. As always it is necessary to scout for pests and spray before a population has established. For aphid control, we use a mix of Botanigard and Mycotrol-O. If the population is isolated to a few plants a hard spray of water will remove the insects. Ranunculus corms need to be pre-germinated before planting. We soak the corms in water with some type of fungicide. Wince we grow organically, we use either Oxidate or Actinovate. They are soaked for about 4 hours then planted out on a tray of vermiculite and then lightly covered with more vermiculite and covered with a dome. The ranuncs are kept in a warm well lit room (60-65°) and begin to root and sprout in 7-10 days.

--#5 Seasonal Bunch or Consumer Bunch (CB): These are primarily grocery store items. We generally choose the flowers, they are always sleeved with our logo sticker and a UPC label. It is important to plan early for plenty of CB material. We generally make our CB's 5-7 stem bunches, if the flowers are particularly large and showy like a giant cockscomb, we may put 3 stems for the same price; likewise, if the item is very skinny stemmed like grasses the count will be much higher. It does not ever pay to skimp on stems in bunches of any item, the consumer will not be inclined to purchase and you will lose the next sale. Suggestions for CB's are Amaranth, Celosia, Larkspur, Snaps, Stock and Nigella. If it is beautiful it will sell! Remember the CB is not an avenue to get rid of your overstock unless it is beautiful product and you are certain that it will sell quickly. Only use #1 top quality, fresh material for all of your sales. We also do what we call our Sunflower CB. These usually consist of 1-3 sunflowers with a stem of bright color like celosia, a few different grains and grasses, and some fluffy filler. These sunflower CB's also fall into the 5-7 stem count like all of the other CB's.

--#6 Succulents: We sell lots of succulents all season long. We sell them individually both potted and un-potted, we sell them also in mixed gardens in both 4" and 6" clay pots. Most of our mixed gardens are sold in cases: 4" gardens are sold in cases of 12 and 6" are sold in cases of 6. We get our clay pots from Ceramo which is a Midwest company; shipping is not outlandish and they have a \$500 minimum. We overwinter the succulents in our greenhouse which is minimally heated. We started to decorate the bare soil with "beach glass". We get the glass pieces from Close the Loop, [www.closetheLoop.com](http://www.closetheLoop.com). Succulents are easy to propagate by either leaf or stem cuttings. We buy in finished product and we buy in cuttings and grow them on, we also propagate them ourselves. We get a high margin from our succulent gardens. All gardens get a product information tag that we purchase from Master Tag and a UPC label affixed to the product tag. Succulents can easily be overwatered, however when we sell our mixed gardens they are always moist upon delivery.

--#7 Peonies: We sell a lot of peonies in our early mixed bouquets and for wedding work. Our peonies are all cut at the "marshmallow" stage which is a fully colored squishy bud. These stems are then processed and stored for later sales. I generally cut peonies 2-3 times each day especially if the weather is sunny and warm. If the peony does open on the stem, those are stored in water for bouquets or truck sales. It is imperative that the stem is completely dry prior to storage, we remove all but 1 or 2 leaves from the stem and place 5 stems together then wrap in a single sheet of newspaper and secure the bundle with blue painter tape. The packages are stored flat in the cooler for up to 4-6 weeks. We periodically check for mold developing and discard the flowers if it is found.

--#8 Lisianthus: BFF grows most to all of our lisianthus from seed. Lisianthus is grouped by flowering time: BFF primarily grows Groups I, II, and III. We have found that the Group IV Lisianthus do not give a successful re-bloom. With all other groups, we get a successful and consistent re-bloom, the second bloom can be somewhat shorter. We get \$14.95 per half pound. This quantity will vary in stem count but usually has about 18-20 flowers. Non-pelleted seed is possible to obtain for certified organic production but not in all of the many varieties. Up until this year there was a grower that

was able to produce Certified Organic lisianthus plugs but no longer is able. When germinating Lisianthus seed be sure to use fresh seed, most is pelleted so easily seen. Do Not Cover seed. We germinate on heat mats 70-75° F under lights, seeds need 16 hours of daylight. Germination starts in about 14-21 days; be patient. If you are growing in open trays, transplant after first true leaves appear. Keep under lights, fertilize regularly, keep moist, not wet. This year we purchased capillary mats and bottom water and are growing them in 200 cell trays.

--#9 Delivery: Yes, I have included Delivery as one of my top income producers. 2016 was the first year BFF consistently charged delivery. We charge \$7-12 per delivery and BFF requires a minimum \$100 order for delivery. The delivery fee helps to offset labor and fuel. I was always reluctant to charge delivery for a variety of reasons. I finally did it and will never go back.

--#10 Stock: We grow stock in the spring and the fall. For all of you in zone 5 or cooler, consider a fall crop of stock. We seed our stock in February and July and harvest in June/July and September/November. Stock is an excellent season extender for zone 5 and cooler. We get a higher price point than for most of our bunches \$8.95 instead of \$8.00. For both plantings, we cover immediately with row cover, in the spring to keep the seedlings warm and in the fall to keep the seedlings cooler, the cover supplies some shade. We use the masonry cages for support and often add additional support with another cage or a layer of netting.

--Financials/Economics: This last slide shows the actual percentages and dollar amounts of our cut flower sales in 2016. I have included a couple of additional varieties of our higher volume items for comparison. The quantity of bunches, total dollars, and percent of sales is across all income streams.