



Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

Natural Farming Systems in the South Video Series

VIDEO TEACHING GUIDE

Cut Flower Production & Marketing Dripping Springs Garden (AR)

I. ORGANIC FARMING

Business partners Mark Cain and Michael Crane raise more than 30 varieties of fruits and vegetables and 60 varieties of cut flowers on their 40-acre farm in the Ozark Plateau near Huntsville, Arkansas. Production at Dripping Springs Garden, which has been in operation 21 years, is concentrated on five acres of field and greenhouse production that are organically-certified. About half of their annual production is devoted to cut flowers, which produce from \$20,000 to \$30,000 in gross annual income per acre and more than three-quarters of their annual income. Two paid summer interns who are selected via websites in national searches help with the work. These interns are usually agriculture students who spend a summer in a beautiful environment while they learn a bevy of production and marketing techniques. The farm operators believe that organic agriculture is the best system of agriculture for the environment and the preservation of natural resources, and is also the best way to produce delicious, nutritious food for their customers. A main goal of organic production is to build healthy soils that are better able to produce crops without so many inputs and amendments. Organic practices have enabled them to build a wide customer base of people who regularly buy their food and flowers because of this quality assurance.

II. DIVERSE FARMING SYSTEM

Diversity of production systems such as:

Raised-Bed Field Production

When farming on small amounts of acreage, the income from each unit of area must be maximized, using intensive production practices. Growing plants in raised beds instead of single rows results in greater yields simply because more plants are stocked per unit of area. This growing method does require greater amounts of labor for weed control than mechanical cultivation of single rows, but mulch or landscape fabric are used to minimize hand weeding and conserve moisture. Planting beds with transplants whenever possible, instead of direct seeding, ensures full stocking and makes succession planting easier, providing continuous harvests and steady cash flow.

Greenhouses and Hoophouses

Dripping Springs Garden uses a greenhouse to produce vegetable and flower plugs that would be quite costly to purchase (or unavailable); more than 20,000 sets are produced in the greenhouse each year, which are then transplanted to the fields when the weather sufficiently warms up later in the spring. Both the main 30' x 80' propagation greenhouse and the two 20' x 48' unheated hoophouses are used to protect overwintering or early/late season crops, adding at least one month of flower production to each end of the production season. Costs for the two 20' x 48' unheated hoophouses were recuperated in the first year by producing specialty flower crops.

Diversity of crops such as:

A blend of high value, specialty, and other crops. When farming on just a few acres, production and the income it generates must be maximized. This means choosing some highly productive crops that are also high in value.

Crops of specialty vegetables and flowers can also give a grower a marketing edge. Other more common crops should also be grown in the mix for purchase by customers who patronize the farm to buy the high value and specialty produce. For instance, customers who buy bouquets of flowers at a local farmers' market are also apt to buy some produce such as potatoes and onions if they are displayed nearby.

A wide selection of produce to meet customer needs and extend the growing season. Dripping Springs Garden grows everything from lilies to garlic, including even bamboo. Succession plantings are timed to produce a continuous harvest through the season, providing a steady income. When some crops produce poorly due to untimely frosts, drought, or critter damage, the farm still has other crops to sell. It amounts to not placing all your eggs in one basket.

Diversity of marketing strategies such as:

Growing a wide variety of sellable crops can produce a broader customer base.

Displaying flowers at a farmers market will naturally attract customers to your booth. Everyone loves flowers. Initially attracted by color and display, many customers will buy both produce and flowers.

Dripping Springs Garden found that flower bouquets are really “value-added” products. At the Fayetteville (Arkansas) Farmers Market, they offer some single-stem items, but bouquets made on-the-spot are the best sellers.



Making bouquets at market is a great draw for customers, who love seeing their bouquet being made. Ready-made bouquets are available for customers in a hurry.

The farm operators increase flower sales by offering bouquets in a price range (\$5, \$8, \$12 and \$20 in 2005). This enables customers to buy bouquets that meet their budgets and flower needs, whether the flowers are being purchased as a gift or to decorate an office or kitchen table.

Diversity of production practices such as:

Cover crops (Austrian winter pea and wheat as winter covers) that are incorporated into the soil as green manure in spring

Crop rotations to help control plant pests and diseases. Dripping Springs Garden avoids cultivation of crop plants that are particularly problematic for organic production.

Mulches to minimize weeds, conserve soil moisture, and build soils

Landscape fabric to retard weed growth, conserve soil moisture and reduce time needed to weed beds. Labor savings are more than ample to justify the cost of \$70 per 300 feet of the landscape fabric when high-value cut flowers are the crop. The fabric lasts five or more years (and has been known to last

8-20 years with care), unlike plastic coverings that usually last a year and do not allow rainfall to penetrate the soil.

Support netting for some varieties of flowers, resulting in straight, marketable stems.

Deer fence that consists of two planes of electric poly rope or tape: a single outside strand at 3' from the ground, and 3 inner strands at 18", 3', and 4 1/2' from the ground. Deer reputedly have poor depth perception and are reluctant to jump over this type of barrier (inner and outer strands are separated by 3'). Deer are trained to avoid the fence by baiting it with peanut butter or commercial apple scent.

Drip irrigation to water plants and to reduce disease

Specialized equipment such as spaders to work soil efficiently

Regular soil tests to show necessary organic amendments

III. COOLERS

Mark Cain and Michael Crane have found that a cooler is an essential piece of equipment and one of the best investments for a flower farm. Originally they used a vintage milk cooler but recently purchased a larger 'Arctic' walk-in cooler to accommodate the expanding production. With three busy harvest days a week, flowers can be picked at just the right stage and quality, and then stored in the cooler at 38 to 50 degree temperatures (depending on crop). As with the vegetables, cool temperatures keep the garden's production in the freshest state for marketing.

Flowers can be harvested at the correct stage for maximum vase life when customers take them home. Occasionally, unsold flowers of sturdy varieties (lilies, gladiolus) are brought home and stored in the cooler until the next market day.

IV. RECORD-KEEPING

Dripping Springs Garden keeps four sets of records so the operators do not "fly blind". The records enable them to make sound decisions regarding succession planting and variety selection.

The four sets of records are:

- A greenhouse journal that records date and quantity planted, planting medium, seed company, etc.
- A daily log that records such information as work performed each day, weather and temperatures.
- A mapping system wherein every planting bed is given a letter and number, and which records the locations of plantings and the seasonal succession of plantings.
- A market journal that records sales, lists special orders, and records what is taken to market.

*This Teaching Guide was designed to accompany the Video produced by Southern SAWG titled **Natural Farming Systems in the South: Cut Flower Production & Marketing.***

*To learn more about this Video and how you can obtain a copy, see the **Resources** Section of the Southern SAWG website at <http://www.ssawg.org>*



The **Unique Tools & Education (UTE) Project for Underserved Commodity Farmers in the South** and the production of this Video and Teaching Guide were created in partnership with **Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group** and the **USDA Risk Management Agency**
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Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (Southern SAWG) is the region's nonprofit leader for sustainable agriculture. Our mission is to empower and inspire farmers, individuals, and communities in the South to create an agricultural system that is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, and humane. Because sustainable solutions depend on the involvement of the entire community, Southern SAWG is committed to including all persons in the South without bias.

We work with thousands of individuals and hundreds of organization throughout thirteen southern states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

Southern SAWG has taken the lead in creating high-quality, user-friendly educational tools for those seeking practical information on sustainable farming enterprises and community food systems for the South.

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