



BIG BLOOMS: Jennifer and Bill Edwards move sunflowers, which are Bill's favorite flower.

Flowers & family

By **RICHARD DAVIS**

BY definition, commodity farming is big business. But some farmers are looking at options to help them continue to farm as small farmers. Many realize they'll need to be innovative to succeed, but they're willing to take the necessary risks.

Husband-and-wife team Bill and Jennifer Edwards of Castalia, N.C., grow and sell wildflowers from their farm and at farmers markets. They're also taking a cue from subscription agriculture, where customers prepay for agricultural products that are produced through the season. In this case, the Edwardses sell subscriptions of flowers, which they prepare and deliver on a weekly basis.

"I was attracted to flowers because my mother had been a master gardener. I inherited an appreciation for flowers and for floral arrangements from her," Jennifer says. "I started looking into it, and at some point, we just decided to try cut flowers. It takes some gumption to bite the bullet and start investing in it, because you do invest not only your time, but also your money. You just have to take the risk."

The motivation was strong, however. Both Jennifer and Bill had childhood attachments to the farm life. His grandparents were farmers. Her grandparents were also farmers. Both families had a generation who went to town to get jobs. But when it came to Bill and Jennifer, they both decided

Key Points

- Selling subscriptions for cut flowers offers a new marketing mechanism.
- The new strategy gives the Edwards family options to maintain traditions.
- Generally, self-owned businesses require long hours.

they wanted to return to farm life.

"We wanted to be farmers because we both appreciated what our grandparents had done on the farm," Jennifer says. "My grandparents' farm was in Middleton, N.C. Bill's grandfather's farm had been in Middlesex. Both of those were our favorite grandparents, and we just loved to go and spend time on their family farm. We wanted to give our love for the farming life to our children."

Prior to coming back to the Edwards family farm in Castalia, both were in the professional world. Both were educated as wildlife biologists. Bill is a stewardship wildlife biologist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. At the time that they came back to the Castalia farm, Jennifer was designing Web sites for PPD, a Research Triangle company that works with clients and partners to develop and deliver pharmaceuticals and other products.

"When I went to her [to quit the job], my boss said, 'Why don't you work from home?'" explains Jennifer. "I worked half-time for PPD and made the transition that way."



FAMILY AFFAIR: The cut-flower business is a family business. The Edwardses' 15-year-old son, Will, is a "partner" in the wildflower business.

Back to the simple life

The "simple" life on the Edwards farm isn't always simple. The Edwardses have four children who have been, currently are or will be homeschooled. Their oldest, 15-year-old Will, who has now moved on to attending public school at Southern Nash High School, works with them in the cut-flower business.

One of the things people who go into business themselves soon realize is that being in business is a tremendous amount of work.

"Cut-flower farming is an all-consuming task," Jennifer says. "It takes over. We used to go camping. We had a camper, but we never used it. We had a boat, which we sold."

Still, they are doing work they enjoy and creating a great world for their children similar to the world they experienced at their grandparents' farms.

In addition to Bill's favorite sun-

Subscriptions boost sales of cut flowers

SELLING premium produce and livestock by subscription appears to be a relatively new marketing strategy, but selling cut flowers by subscription for home or office delivery is even more novel.

In general, the marketing device of subscription selling has developed out of community-supported agriculture. Farmers opting into CSA programs sell premium products featuring a special attraction for a special market. For example, they sell "locally grown products" or organic produce or organic livestock products. Customers are willing to pay a premium price for the perceived advantage of "freshness," "wholesomeness" or for some other health benefit.

Most CSA farm products are sold by subscription; that is, people in the community sign up and prepay for food that will be produced throughout a growing season.

Selling cut flowers by subscription is a natural outgrowth of this kind of selling arrangement. Whereas most CSA subscription products tend to promote healthiness, subscription cut flowers promote the beauty and ambience of having flowers in the home or office. Some subscriptions are delivered to the customer's house each week, every two weeks and so on. Some are delivered to offices or other businesses. Some subscriptions are given as gifts — for example, cut flowers that are delivered to a shut-in patient at a nursing home.

Subscriptions are typically sold on as little as a four-week basis or up to 50 weeks. A four-week subscription by various sellers, delivered weekly, might cost as little as \$100 or as much as \$225 or more. A 50-week subscription might sell for \$750 or as much as \$1,500 or more.

flowers, the fields are full of delphiniums, larkspurs, black-eyed Susans, gladiolus, peonies and many more.

"It varies throughout the year," Jennifer says. "As the year changes, so does the color palette."

Jennifer developed the business by learning from other growers. She belongs to the Association of Cut Flower Growers, a national organization.

"We have only been in business for three years, and I attribute a lot of our success to the ACFG and to being a lucky person that was invited to attend a cut-flower mentoring program, sponsored by North Carolina Cooperative Extension," Jennifer says. "Only a handful of people — 15 of us — were selected to attend that class. I drove back and forth to Chapel Hill to visit Pery-winkle Farm where we had a weekly class for six weeks. So, doing that, I was being trained by another cut-flower grower who had been growing cut flowers for 10 to 15 years.

"One thing they talked about was selling subscriptions. I just did what they were doing," Jennifer says.