

Flowers keep farm profitable



MICHAEL O'BRIEN

By RICHARD DAVIS

IT'S midafternoon and the air is still. We're all feeling a sense of undeserved fortune because it could be unbearably hot, but it's not. The spring weather is absolutely perfect.

We sit in the shade in white slat chairs, a picnic table to one side hinting at wonderful family get-togethers in the evenings. Beyond, the perfect two-story, white clapboard house is held down by strong, twin chimneys, one on either side.

The house looks quite imposing, as if it were planted there, then sprang up whole out of the ground. It has deep roots. Something about this place is quintessentially Southern. It could be a model for a William Faulkner novel.

Michael and Daphne O'Brien have been growing cut flowers on their Whitakers, N.C., family operation for 14 years. The old house is from Michael's grandfather on his mother's side. Michael vividly recalls vacations here as a child. "My grandfather was a newspaperman working for the *Star News* and, before that, writing sports for the *News and Observer*," he says. "My mother was an art teacher.

"I just always wanted to live here. When my grandfather went to the nursing home, I asked him about living here, and now I understand why he was pleased with that. So Daphne and I did the ... Eddie Albert thing, if you remember 'Green Acres.'"

The O'Briens left their respectable big-city careers and moved down east to Whitakers. Michael gave up his photography career in Raleigh. Daphne



THE GOOD LIFE: Despite successful careers in Raleigh, the O'Briens wanted to be farmers and live a rural life. It's hard work, but it has its compensations — like a quiet life out of the hustle and bustle of the city.

Key Points

- Restarting a family farm from land alone can be an overwhelming task.
- A second strategy is to find a niche product and market it.
- Raising cut flowers, especially during picking, requires teamwork.

gave up teaching English at North Carolina State University.

New beginnings

At the start, some 20 years ago, Michael came back to manage the farm as a traditional farmer. At the time they were growing tobacco, peanuts, cotton, corn and soybeans. But it was easy to see the difficulties that lay ahead.

"For me to have jumped in with just the availability of land would have cost more than I could have ever shouldered," he says.

In retrospect, he adds, with the disappearance of the tobacco and peanut programs, it was probably a good thing that he wasn't able to get into traditional farming. "We'd have been too small to survive, probably," he says.

Natural leanings

One year, they grew zinnias. They were so fabulous and plentiful that they started cutting them and placing them in mason jars and hauling them to the farmers market in Tarboro. Now they have 14 acres of cut flowers and work seven days a week.

"It is like having milk cows," Daphne adds, smiling. "Something always needs milking. Well, here, something always needs picking."

Making the land work three times

The 14 acres serve well. By growing flowers, they can triple-crop.

They plant on 6-foot middles using a ripper-bedder to make up the beds. They have a transplanter for plugs.

"We grow a gazillion plugs," Michael says. "We also have a separate transplanter for bulbs. We try to grow, I guess, 50,000 bulbs a year as annuals."

Now, 50,000 of anything seems like a big job.

"But with a mechanical transplanter, it really does go pretty quickly," Michael says. "I have two women, neighbors, who seem to enjoy it, who ride on the back of the transplanter. I can plant 10,000 bulbs in three hours. The tractor goes along, knocks down a row, opens up a furrow. They feed the bulbs in by hand, and the machine covers the bulbs back up."

Michael and Daphne do much of the work together, but they have a few divided chores. The difficult part is the picking, she says. They do that together, too. They can't depend on outside help. There are just not that many people who have the skills to do the picking.

"That is incredibly labor intensive — and also skilled," Daphne says. "That may be because our emphasis is on high quality. We can't send just anybody out to the field to get the flowers. That is something you learn from doing it for a long time, from experience."

Vol. 25 No. 8

Fast find:

■ News Watch	1
■ Letters & Opinion	10
■ Crop Production	11
■ Marketplace/Classified	15
■ Livestock	21
■ Property Management	22
■ Equipment	24
■ Lifestyle	25
■ Marketing	26



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A CLOSER LOOK: Michael O'Brien checks flowers for insects or disease problems.

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