

Flower business drying up and doing quite well

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MT. ANGEL, ORE. — When it comes to the nursery industry, Dan and Bernadette Hammelman are blowing around a lot of hot air.

But that's only natural since the Hammelmans are in the dried flower business.

"Many large-scale cut flower producers sell dried flowers because dried is what you do with fresh when you can't sell them," Bernadette said. "The problem with this is that it takes two to three days before you know flowers won't sell. And by then, you've lost quality. This gives us the advantage, because we go for the dried in the first place."

The Hammelman's began their dry adventure six years ago.

"We thought this would be a good project for mom and the kids," Bernadette explained. "We quickly grew into a full-time, year-round business."

The work begins in February, when planting season arrives.

"We plant annuals from February until May, depending on the variety," Dan said. "We spread out the plantings so we harvest in an even flow and so everything doesn't mature at once. We usually begin harvesting in July. It takes about 100 days for a flower variety to mature."

Harvesting is done mostly by hand. "We cut a whole row," Dan said. "Some blooms will be good, some will be over or under ripe. We're going for color value. Our sorters look for the bad stuff and remove it."

Once the harvest is completed, the flowers are tied to racks and readied for drying.

"We use forced-air drying," Dan said. "Two years ago we had a wet summer and the flowers wouldn't dry. We needed to ensure consistent quality, so we installed two dryers. It takes two to three days in the dryer depending on the type of flower."

Once the flowers are dried to about 16 percent moisture content, they are packed into 4-ounce bunches and boxed for shipping.

"Shipping is very costly for us because dried flowers don't weigh a lot," Bernadette said. "So we pay shipping on a dimensional weight basis. We're charged to just fill space in an airplane."

The Hammelman's also produce row crops to help subsidize their floral business.

"Farming in the Willamette Valley is competitive," Dan said. "Farms need a back-up niche. Raising green beans, cauliflower, peas and grass seed helps us have increased gross with decreased acreage."

Growing new varieties every year is another key to staying profitable.

"This business is so competitive," Bernadette said. "The main competition comes from Holland. So we're always looking for new and different varieties to spur interest in dries. Flowers appeal to both Dan and I. I was a florist before we got married, so I know what I want our production to look like. We've improved our quality every year."





HOW DRY THEY ARE — Dan and Bernadette Hammelman, above, check the moisture content of a batch of flowers being dried at their farm in Mt. Angel, Ore. Flowers stay in the dryers two to three days, depending on the variety, until moisture levels reach about 16 percent. At left, Lisa Crouse weighs freshly dried flowers into 4-ounce bundles before sending them down a conveyor belt for sleeving and shipping.



GROWING INVENTORY — A colorful field of larkspur grows at the Hammelman's farm. The couple also grows row crops, including vegetables and grass seed, to help subsidize their dried flower business.