



# A CUT ABOVE IN MONTANA

The “off-season” doesn’t have to mean off-sales. This Montana-based garden center has found that retailing cut flowers is one successful way to keep profits up all year-round.

By Mick Gainan



**O**ur location, tucked back into a residential area, is a destination shopping space, but you need to know where we are to find us. Though we have a large, lit sign on Main Street, just 1,600 feet away, Gainan’s Heights Garden Center and Greenhouses is still kind of a secret. Founded in 1951, our family-owned business has prospered from the original Gainan’s Flowers location in downtown Billings to two different corporations consisting of two Gainan’s Flowers locations and Gainan’s Garden Center and Greenhouses. Our constantly changing focus of new plants — including annuals, perennials, trees and shrubs — is updated frequently, and our small line of hard goods leans toward such items as garden giftware, statuary and garden hand tools but does not cross the line to power equipment.

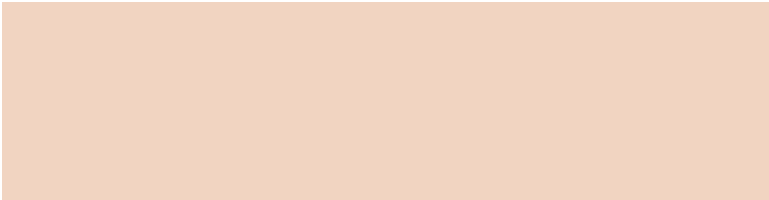
This area of Billings, the largest city in Montana with a population of 100,000, has a high school, two junior highs and five grade schools. Our surroundings bring a wonderful cross-section of clients to the garden center — from gardeners to teachers, farmers and ranchers to mechanics, hunting and fishing guides to the local weather and sports reporters, to retired and just plain tired folks.

## **GARDEN CENTER IN CONTEXT**

In the last five years, the retail side of our business has grown 16 percent overall, and our fresh flower product, including arranged flowers and flowers by the stem, has increased 26 percent. The floating breakout of cut flower product consistently remains 8.3–10.2 percent of our sales at our garden center.

We decided to get into the cut flower business at our garden center location because ♦

Cut flowers in perspective: Can you envision this in your own garden center? Gainan’s cooler of designed arrangements is positioned directly across from one of their tills (foreground).



the only other opportunity to buy cut flowers in this area of town was from a flower and balloon shop and grocery store. All three Gainan locations are big on delivering full-service. Flowers in design work, wed-

Gainan's keeps two coolers of fresh cut flowers: One holds designed arrangements in the 15-20 styles ordered from the main Gainan's downtown location every week (above); the other showcases flowers by the stem in 20-30 varieties of cut flowers, foliage and tropicals (right). Extra galvanized cans hang on the outside of this case to invite customers to reach in and help themselves.

dings and funerals are a strong focus of our flower shops, so while the folks working in our garden center did not have a lot of experience in this area in the beginning, we were able to draw from our established resources to develop our cut flower department. At the same time, because the garden center is the plant broker for our retail and flower shops, they also depend on us for expertise in their seasonal plant presentations — whether they be stunning hanging baskets for patios, orchids, bonsai, herbs or poinsettias.

My history is in using cut flowers in all kinds of customer relationships, meaning that this product is more than just flowers — it's a way to participate with the public from the beginning to the last day. The people I have had the privilege to help over the years have created, in most cases, the best experiences of my life.

We see a lot of opportunity in this area, along with a lot of competition. Offering fresh flowers at our store has opened up many doors for long-term friendships and has rounded out our garden center product line-up. Our stores are continuing to develop their own neighborhood clienteles. It's nice to have the neighbors recognize our garden center as their "flower shop" as well as where they go to buy their bedding plants — and it keeps them coming year-round.







**GETTING STARTED**

If you’re thinking of integrating cut flowers into your garden center product mix, you’ll first need to decide what level you want to start at, and be prepared to give it three to five years before the business takes off, with an assortment of good, quality product. Advertise and promote your cut flowers. Be sure to budget for the education it will take to sell and service flowers and subscribe to the appropriate magazines to keep up with trends.

Many networking opportunities are available but often over-

looked. I advise joining at least three florist support groups. We belong to the local Montana Florist Association (about 100 members), the Northwest Florist Association (about 300 members) and the Society of American Florists. Our budget for this is under \$1,000 annually, or approximately \$90 per month. If you attend the design schools and conventions that these organizations offer, you can get many ideas just by keeping your eyes open and staying connected. Look to your local wholesaler to see what groups of professional organizations there are in your area. In Montana alone, between the MFA and NFA, there are eight to 12 design schools sponsored yearly (total membership costs for these two groups is under \$200



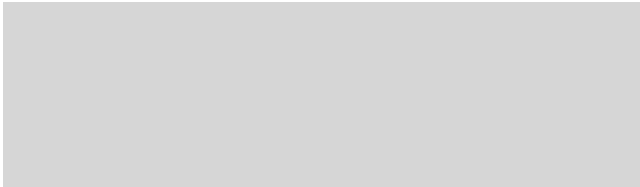
per year). Also, national wire services have organized groups of designers and business consultants they provide to the state and regional members to help support what we do. See what it takes to belong to those services and get involved.

Several times per year we offer design classes; fifteen people to a class works well for us. We promote these in our local newspaper and in statement stuffers along with our other upcoming events that are posted at the garden center. For example, just before Thanksgiving, we advertised a “Build Your Own Thanksgiving Centerpiece” workshop for \$25. The fee covered one hour of hands-on instruction, the container and all fresh materials. Each student took home their finished design, resulting in happy customers ready to sign up for the next class.

Consistently having something in the works is important with these classes. Having the next class centerpiece designed and on display with appropriate signage when the class arrives sells the next class — and the opportunity to learn some of our most-protected secrets. On the flip side, these classes may provide you with a valuable group of holiday designers or seasonal greenhouse help to choose from for those huge labor demand times! You might want to keep a stack of employment applications handy. This is most effective not during your peak spring planting season, but during the off-season of September to March, or whenever it is in your gardening area.

**HOW WE DO IT**

Our fresh flower offerings are ordered through our central design department at our main downtown location, Gainan’s Flowers. They are set up to order and receive the product, unpack it and recondition it. ♦



Hydration is very important, along with the coolers and keeping the product fresh and rotated. We have a menu for each season that consists of 15-20 styles, allowing consistency of designs from week to week. The winter menu is introduced in December, right after Christmas; spring in March/April; summer in May/June; and fall in August/September. Our holiday flowers are ordered in the same fashion. Depending on the event, 20-25 bouquet styles are developed for each season. Flowers by the stem are offered weekly, depending on market availability and generally include 20-30 varieties of fresh cut flowers, foliage and tropicals. We do not inventory huge numbers of each of these items; we prefer to order them three to five times a week from our downtown location as needed. Daily availability is faxed or e-mailed, and we order off of their form.

The pricing levels we use are threefold: Due to the level of designer professionalism required to produce the product, we have flowers by the stem, arrangement and corsage/wedding work prices. The reason for the price differences is that a traditional nursery or salesperson that is well-versed in nursery product and design, for example, can assist a client in creating a beautiful selection of flowers by the stem or arranged flowers for a relatively low cost. However, wedding work, special events or sympathy flowers cost more to sell because they require more training, specialized product and more time to produce. It also takes a longer period of time to locate the flowers from North American, South American or European markets.

In the last eight years, we have put a fair amount of time and energy into developing our fresh flower business. This has meant relocating our coolers, as well as re-shelving, re-signing and remodeling them. Choosing the proper lighting was also important to bring out the natural colors of the cut flowers. Progress has also meant encouraging our clients to reach into the coolers and help themselves, with staff ready and visibly available to help them make their flower decisions.

Our signs identify each of the bouquet styles. We are constantly putting more emphasis on loose flowers and “pick of the month” bunches (available from wholesalers), generally having some sort of in-store special — a three-day event — promoted through our change-letter signs and in-store counter signs. A sign might read: “Today’s Special: 5 stems of Stargazer Lilies, \$11.95 (reg. \$6 per stem).” Our attitude is not to try to sell the biggest bouquet, but to sell the freshest product.

**A FEW LAST WORDS**

Be realistic amid your optimism about integrating cut flowers into the garden center. You’ll need to do some self-searching to figure out if you can compete in the environment around you, or if you can offer a better twist to a product that lots of people have. Ask yourself if you can afford to compete: the “build it and they will come” philosophy is the reason we all get into business, but if they don’t come, be prepared to do what’s necessary to succeed — whether that’s adding another segment to the business, subtracting something or hiring someone who knows something about the new addition. Be prepared to spend some money and follow your plan completely through to the end — but don’t turn the reins over 100 percent. Like anything else, you wouldn’t do that with another part of your business unless your pockets are really deep. 🍀

Mick Gainan shares ownership responsibilities of Gainan’s Garden Center and Greenhouses in Billings, Mont., with his family. He welcomes the exchange of ideas on cut flower retailing from both those interested in incorporating them into their garden centers and those who are presently engaged in this area of business; he may be reached by phone at (406) 248-5029 or E-mail at [garden@gainans.com](mailto:garden@gainans.com).