



flower growing



what is it?

This topic is about growing your own flowers to cut for the house, for gifts, or for family events, instead of buying them from florists, supermarkets or petrol stations. If you really enjoy flower growing, this could evolve into a small business selling some of your home-grown flowers.

Historically, people didn't buy bunches of imported flowers from petrol stations and supermarkets. Until a generation or two ago, you either grew your own cut flowers, or bought them from a florist who sourced UK-grown flowers from a wholesaler or directly from Covent Garden flower market. Country people grew cottage garden flowers to brighten up their cottages, and grand people had teams of gardeners, hot-houses and walled gardens to produce stunning cut flowers for the Big House.

Until the 1950s there was a thriving UK flower-growing industry. Then came lorries and air-freight, and the UK flower industry disappeared, until by 2006 there were only about half a dozen commercial flower growers in the UK. There is now, thank heavens, a renaissance in UK flower growing, with commercial growers now numbering in the hundreds, many of them artisan-scale.

Flowers can be classified into half-hardy annuals (which you sow in the spring to flower in the summer), hardy annuals (which you sow in the early autumn to flower next spring and summer), and perennials, which are plants or bushes which live and flower for many years. There are also bulbs, which may be autumn planted, spring planted, or just left in the ground to do their own thing year after year.



Anemones (back) and grape hyacinth (foreground).



Home-grown, organic flowers make lovely bouquets for weddings, funerals or other family events.

what are the benefits?

Firstly, **financial benefits**: supermarket flowers are cheap, but the cost over a year can still add up to quite a lot, and if you buy fancy cut flowers from florists or garden centres, a bunch might set you back £10. So you can save a lot of money by growing your own, plus you get fresh flowers every day, and access to types of flower which you never see for sale - including flowers with better perfume, as the commercial varieties are selected for appearance to the detriment of scent.

Secondly, there are **health benefits**: gardening increases your sense of well-being. There's something about being in contact with nature and the seasons which makes gardeners happier - this 'something' is also used in horticultural therapy and eco-therapy as a treatment for the mind. Physically, gardening keeps you active and improves fitness: while you are gardening you're not sitting at a desk or in an armchair!

Finally, the **environmental benefits** of growing your own flowers are local and global. Flower gardening attracts and supports wildlife, improves local communities (people stop and talk to you if you garden in your front garden or on the pavement outside your house), and of course growing your own flowers cuts out the pesticides and CO₂ which emanate from the huge industry of chemical-drenched, intensively-grown flowers that are first air-freighted around the world then lorry-freighted around the country, often wrapped in excessive and non-biodegradable packaging.



what can I do?

To get going, buy a few packets of seed and a bag of compost, and buy or improvise some pots. At a minimum, you need a few big pots on a balcony or window sill and a couple of small seed trays or old food trays/yoghurt pots to sow the seeds and nurture the baby plants. If you have access to land, a couple of beds 2.4m x 1m would make you almost self-sufficient in flowers, or an area 3m x 4m would be plenty. You can set aside a separate area of garden or you could intersperse rows of flowers between rows of veg.

You'll need to buy some seed compost, and if you're growing in containers, you'll also need to buy compost to fill your big pots and tubs. For environmental reasons, it's important to avoid peat-based compost.

If you're starting in spring, sow some half-hardy annuals in seed trays on a window sill in March onwards, in an unheated greenhouse / coldframe in April, or direct in the ground in late April or May. Flowers such as cosmos, zinnias, snapdragons and rudbekias grow easily and will give a huge supply of flowers for cutting for several months.

If you have space, you can grow perennials, which you usually obtain as small plants from nurseries, friends, market stalls or garden centres. A good starting selection would be roses, astrantias, lavender, Japanese anemones, and some herbs.

During the flowering season, cut every day. The more you cut, the more flowers will be produced. If you leave flowers to wither and go to seed, the plant will stop flowering, so dead-heading is a must - i.e. once they're past their peak, remove any flowers that you don't cut. If you go away, you can arrange for a friend or neighbour to come and cut your flowers daily - they might be rather pleased to be asked, as they'll then benefit from your lovely cut flower garden.

In late summer / early autumn, sow seeds for hardy annuals such as sweet peas, cornflowers, euphorbia, lady's mantle and love-in-a-mist. These will usually survive winter with no protection, but a coldframe or mini-greenhouse would be useful for larger, earlier flowering plants in the spring. It can also provide useful protection for half-hardy annuals sown outdoors in the spring, and for autumn cuttings of perennials.

Equipment-wise, there's very little you need other than a selection of pots, seed trays, a hand fork



These shaggy blooms are double sunflowers.

and trowel, and some secateurs (or strong scissors) for cutting. A garden spade and fork will be handy if you have more ground (opt for the smaller versions called 'border forks' and 'border spades'). A hoe is almost essential if you're growing flowers in rows in the ground - hoeing between the rows keeps weeds from becoming a problem. A window sill and a couple of plastic propagators (seed trays with tall plastic covers) are all you need for starting seedlings, but a coldframe or small outdoor greenhouse will be useful if you have space.

Flower growing only gets difficult if you're preparing for an event. That takes more experience in planning what will be in bloom at a particular time, and what to grow in reserve in case the season turns out unusually late or early. As with anything you do, you're bound to run into problems - like slugs or pigeons eating young plants. Netting can protect plants from birds, and if you have a serious problem with slugs try growing your baby plants bigger before planting them out.

resources

- lowimpact.org/flower-growing for more info, courses, links, books, inc.
- Lynn Byczynsky, *the Flower Farmer*
- Sue Stickland, *Planning Your Organic Flower Garden*
- Eileen Powell, *the Gardener's A-Z of Growing Flowers from Seed to Bloom*
- flowersfromthefarm.co.uk network of flower growers
- thebritishflowercollective.com – UK directory of flower growers

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