

FIELD
TESTED



COLLABORATIVE PURCHASES FOR A FLOWER COOPERATIVE



Field Tested is a series of reports about farm tools that have been tested by Montana farmers to enhance their specialty crop production. The reports describe these farmers' findings to help others make informed decisions about their specialty crop businesses. Visit FarmLinkMontana.org/fieldtested to read more Field Tested reports. This project is administered by the Community Food & Agriculture Coalition with funding from the Montana Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.

FARM BLOOMS | WHITEFISH



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Farm Blooms Snapshot

Location: Whitefish, MT
Operator: Whitney Pratt,
Pam Gerwe, and Barb Brant
Acres: Two farms, totaling 6 acres
Crops: Cut flowers



INTRODUCTION

Farm Blooms is a newly formed flower collaborative between “three farmer-florists” Barb Brant from Foolish Blooms, Pam Gerwe from Purple Frog Gardens, and Whitney Pratt, who manages Farm Blooms. The two farms in the Flathead Valley made purchases together for growing season 2020 to give them a competitive edge on Montana’s short growing season, increase greenery and filler flowers for their finished products, and to facilitate and increase larger sales while enticing new customers. There is growing demand for locally grown flowers for special events and Farm Blooms looks to grow this niche market to diversify revenue for their respective farms.

PURPLE FROG GARDENS + FOOLISH BLOOMS = FARM BLOOMS

Purple Frog Gardens, operated by Pam Gerwe and her husband, is a small, iconic Flathead Valley market-farm that has operated in Whitefish since the early 90's. They grow vegetables, berries, fruit, flowers, and CSA shares, with the help of countless volunteers, community members, and young people. They believe that growing flowers for specialty arrangements will help diversify their farm income and develop new relationships with businesses and customers.



Barb and Scott Brant of Foolish Blooms grow over 50 flower varieties on just one acre of land within Whitefish town limits and have been in operation since 2015. The two are well-known in Montana for their work increasing local food access in the Flathead Valley, working with such organizations as Nourish the Flathead.

Whitney Pratt, who helps operate Purple Frog Gardens, also manages Farm Blooms. Farm Blooms offers locally grown, seasonal, pesticide-free flowers. The trio offers flowers A la Carte, full service, or in bulk for special occasions, offering a unique experience for those looking to support the slow flower movement. They sell their bouquets and flowers at farmers markets, for special events such as weddings and funerals, and bouquets through Wicked Good Produce, a regional, Flathead Valley farm Co-op who has an online platform that customers can order through.

Farm Blooms had three goals they hoped to achieve with their Field Tested mini-grant: 1) to increase production of focus, fill, and greenery flowers, 2) to decrease labor, and 3) to increase production and attract more customers to their unique one-on-one customer offerings. They made eclectic and various purchases to suit the needs of their specific circumstance.

IMPACTS OF EQUIPMENT PURCHASES

Increase in Production

Both farms were able to plant more perennial and annual flowers that would grow in Montana's short growing season and appeal to the greater flower market that typically imports their selection non-locally. Perennial flowers planted included ranunculus, peonies, clematis, sun kings, and many others. Annual flowers included unique sweet pea varieties from England, zinnias, rue, and others.

Their increase in production was mainly in Anemone, ranunculus and lisianthus. They believe the addition of locally made compost, Dirt Rich, really helped produce stronger plants with more blooms. They only used a small portion of the Regenichar and Regeniteck due to disruptions during the season, so they were not able to gather enough data to accurately test its effectiveness. Both farms hope to use it next year and track any changes. The purchase of row covers gave both farms two extra weeks on either end of the growing season, which really helps in Montana, where the growing season is relatively short.

Equipment Purchased

- Perennial Flowers
- Flower Seed
- Locally produced Regenichar and Regeniteck
- Drip Irrigation Material
- Locally Produced Compost
- Low Tunnels for Season Extension
- Weed Fabric

The improvements and changes made during the 2020 season led to an overall increase in production. In 2020 both farms collectively saw a 4-fold increase in flower sales when compared to the 2019 season.

Decrease in Labor

The two farms purchased drip irrigation and weed fabric to help establish new flower beds. Weed reduction and proper moisture are the foundation to good crops and impactful for overall labor in small operations. They'd like to add more weed fabric and drip irrigation in the future. The addition of the weed fabric allowed for a decrease in weeding time by about 20%, helping reduce labor costs overall.

Both Purple Frog Gardens and Foolish Blooms have been using drip irrigation for a long time because of its water efficiency. It is particularly helpful for flowers because it prevents flowers being damaged by overhead sprinklers. With the addition of more drip irrigation, both farms were able to spend less time in general on irrigation and it also helped increase yields during the drier parts of the summer.

COVID-19 Impacts on Customer Offerings

The timing of planning for growing season 2020 coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As things were uncertain, the community-invested farmers wondered if they should pivot some of their flower growing into food production. They ultimately decided to continue with their

flower plans, although with many other farmers across the region, started later than anticipated. Many special events were completely canceled, a direct impact on their newly forming business.

Despite these challenges, as a newer off-shoot business, they increased their profits modestly from the prior year and gained a new customer base for a popular pandemic event: the elopement. This event focuses mostly on flowers and photos, perfect for a flower operation. They already have many bookings for weddings in Summer 2021.

Additional Resources

Montana Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block Grant Program: The purpose of this program is solely to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops in Montana. Visit their website to find funding opportunities and more information. Search [Montana SCBG](#).

Field Tested Reports and Videos: Find more reports about other projects and see videos of tools in action at the [Field Tested webpage, under Resources on FarmLinkMontana.org](#)

Farm Link Montana: A project of the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition to connect Montana's beginning farmers and ranchers with the tools they need to succeed:
farmlinkmontana.org

