



# Woody Cuts

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## Introduction

Woody cuts are portions of woody ornamentals used for floral or decorative purposes. These include foliage, flowering branches, fruit and seeds, as well as bare stems and branches. Numerous shrubs, trees and woody vines can be grown commercially for these purposes. Cut flower growers may want to add woody cuts to their production line to diversify their products, expand their markets, and extend the floral season. Growers will need to be familiar with the different production and harvest requirements of a diverse group of plant material.

## Marketing and Market Outlook

The demand for cut flowers has increased since the early 1990s. Woody cuts, which may be sold fresh or dried, have become a popular cut flower industry segment. According to the Census of Horticultural Specialties, woody cuts account for less than 25% of cut stem sales in Kentucky. Kentucky cut stem production (both wholesale and retail) was reported less than \$200,000 in the USDA 2014 Census of Horticultural Specialties. This may indicate growth potential for sales of woody cut stems in Kentucky, particularly for operations already selling direct to consumers. The floral market shifts as consumer preferences change. Growers must be willing to adjust their production to meet these demands, a challenging task when dealing with woody plants.

Marketing channels for woody cuts are similar to cut flower markets. Potential retail outlets include farmers markets, roadside stands and U-pick. Fresh cut material can be sold either as individual stems or bouquets. Most



farmers markets and U-pick operations close in late summer/early fall, so growers utilizing these markets will need to locate alternative channels for winter and early spring material, such as pussy willows. Some growers include cut flowers in their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription offerings. Wholesale options include wholesale florists, supermarkets, garden centers and craft stores. Hotels, restaurants and the internet may offer other marketing opportunities. Bundling woody cuts with a service, such as subscription bouquets or other regular delivery services, may be another way for growers to explore this market. Local growers will have the market

advantage of being able to supply the freshest plant material, as well as being able to provide hard-to-find and difficult-to-ship specialty cuts. Growers should develop multiple marketing channels, especially if making the long-term



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investment in woody plant establishment.

Many florists prefer to purchase the bulk of their plant material from large wholesalers that can fill orders several months in advance. However, more wholesale florists are becoming interested in featuring a local product. Small growers who are not able to supply a dependable quantity of standard floral material (and therefore unable to compete at this level) should instead concentrate on growing products that are unique, of local interest, and difficult to ship. Some Kentucky farm entrepreneurs have made rounds to local retail florists with whatever woody and herbaceous plant material the farm has available. Offering unusual fare to florists that enjoy creating original arrangements can result in sales. Harvested woody cuts that are not the quality demanded by the floral industry can be worked into bouquets sold at farmers markets and other channels.

## **Production considerations**

### *Plant selection*

A wide variety of deciduous and evergreen plant material should be planted to diversify the market offering and fill out the season. Consider a mix of the unusual along with the usual. Potential plant characteristics to consider include: native or adapted plant material; short time period from planting to harvest; quick re-growth after pruning or harvesting operations; good flower, berry and/or leaf retention; and long vase life. Maintaining plants that can be harvested at various stages of growth has the advantage of providing material throughout the various seasons of the year. For example, growers will want to be able to provide flowering branches in spring and summer; fall foliage and berries in autumn; and colorful or unique bare branches in winter. Woody stems that can be forced to bloom are another way to extend the season.

### *Site selection and planting*

Plants for woody cuts generally prefer fertile, well-drained soil, and full sun throughout the day. A number of plants, however, can be grown on marginal land or wet sites that are unsuitable for other crops. For example, pussy willow and corkscrew willow can be grown as filter strips between annual crops and farm waterways. A few crops, such as hydrangea, require some shade. Meeting each crop's specific cultural requirements will be necessary for a quality product.

Soil preparation includes adding fertilizers and soil amendments prior to planting. Care should be taken to not over-fertilize plants as high fertility often favors vegetative growth at the expense of flowers and fruit. A source of water for irrigation is often essential to maintaining good plant health during dry conditions, or at least during plant establishment.

Field spacing will depend not only on the crop requirements, but also the size of the equipment used for tilling, mowing and harvesting. Many growers plant double rows with paths between beds for field operations. A tight spacing of plants within the row can help produce longer, straighter stems in some species.

Pruning is often used to encourage the growth of long stems. Some plants should be cut to the ground during dormancy. It is important to know whether flowers/fruit are produced on the current or previous wood to determine the best time for pruning, cutting back and harvesting. Some plants, such as holly, require a pollinator.

### *Pest management*

Disease and insect problems will vary with plants grown. Scouting can help the grower determine when and how often pesticides should be applied. Weed management is especially critical because competition from weeds can interfere with plant establishment and reduce the quality of plants. Black plastic mulch or landscape fabric applied to beds prior to planting will help reduce weed problems and may be suitable for some plants while limiting the growth and productivity of others. Organic mulches, such as wood chips, can be applied before or after planting, either alone or on top of landscape fabric.

### *Harvest and storage*

It may take from two to five years for a new planting to produce a marketable product. The proper stage of harvest will depend upon a number of factors including type of market, cultivar, distance to market, intended use, and plant stage desired.

Woody stems should be at least 18 inches long, but can be up to 7 feet long, depending on what the market requires. Flowering stems can be harvested anywhere from bud to full bloom. Once harvested, flowering stems are placed in a bucket of water containing floral

preservative. They should then be placed in a cooled area or cooler until sold. Floral preservative and refrigeration are essential to keeping flowers fresh, as well as extending their shelf and vase life. Fresh, more pliable branches are often more desirable for some plants; however, it is preferable to dry some woody cuts prior to marketing. Some stems cut in late winter can be forced to flower weeks ahead of their natural bloom period.

Branches cut for their fruit, such as bittersweet, are generally harvested after the fruit ripens. Ornamental bare branches are generally cut when dormant. They can be dried and stored for months.

#### *Labor requirements*

Woody cuts production is labor and management intensive. Planting, weeding and harvesting all require manual labor. Crops that flower all at once will require the instant availability of additional laborers during harvest. Marketing, filling orders, and delivering to customers will place additional labor requirements on this enterprise.

### **Economic considerations**

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of nursery stock, plant establishment, and installation of an irrigation system. Additional start-up expenses can include plastic mulch or landscape fabric, as well as a refrigerator or cooler.

Two or more years of growth may be required before any volume of saleable material is harvested; therefore cost and return projections should include interest payments and maintenance costs from planting until harvest begins. Due to the wide range of potential woody plant materials and many marketing options, a generalized budget is not realistic. Contacting florists, floral wholesale firms, and other potential customers, as well as other woody cuts growers and grower associations, may be helpful in pulling together budget and marketing information based on the specific plants that will be grown.

### **Selected Resources**

#### *On the web*

- Extended Vase Life for Cut Stems of *Hydrangea paniculata* (University of Kentucky) <http://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu/hort/files/documents/vaselife.pdf>
- Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers <http://www.ascfg.org>
- Cut Flower Production (Penn State Agricultural Alternatives, 2012) <https://extension.psu.edu/cut-flower-production>
- Forcing Branches for Cut Flowers (University of Vermont, 2022) <https://www.uvm.edu/news/extension/forcing-branches-winter-flowers>
- Southeast Outdoor Cut Flower Manual (North Carolina State University, 2000) [https://cutflowers.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/se\\_cut\\_flwr.pdf? fwd=no](https://cutflowers.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/se_cut_flwr.pdf? fwd=no)
- Commercial Specialty Cut Flower Production Harvest Systems, MF-2155 (Kansas State University, 1995) <https://ag.umass.edu/sites/agcenter/files/pdf-doc-ppt/MF2155.pdf>
- Specialty Cut Flower Production and Marketing (ATTRA, 2006) <https://attra.ncat.org/publication/specialty-cut-flower-production-and-marketing/>

#### *Books in print*

- *Specialty Cut Flowers: The Production of Annuals, Perennials, Bulbs, and Woody Plants for Fresh and Dried Cut Flowers*. A.M. Armitage and Judy M. Laushman, 2nd edition. 2003. Timber Press. Portland, OR. 636 pp.
- *Woody Cut Stems for Growers and Florists: Production and Post-Harvest Handling of Branches for Flowers, Fruit, and Foliage*. Lane Greer and John Dole. 2008. Timber Press: Portland OR. 576 pp.

#### **Suggested Citation:**

Kaiser, C. and M. Ernst. (2017). *Woody Cuts*. CCD-CP-76. Lexington, KY: Center for Crop Diversification, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. Available: <http://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu/ccd/files/woodycuts.pdf>

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**August 2017**

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