

NEWER IDEAS IN GROWING GERANIUMS*

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Today this old-fashioned annual pot plant crop is new fashion, and the popularity of the geranium is expected to continue and even increase for many years to come. Three words are left out of the title--I would like to add "at a profit." These three little words are very important. In fact, everything I have to say stems from this simple phrase "at a profit." "Geraniums at a profit" are no easier than any other of our pot plant crops.

There are three classes of geraniums which are of economic value to us for spring plant sales: the zonals, by far the largest group, the ones we are all familiar with; the Ivy leaf geranium and the fancy leaf zonals. During the following discussion I have these types in mind.

Selling

My first topic is selling. Keeping in mind the importance of the flower sales situation today, the sale of annual plants, of which the geranium heads the list, is one bright spot. This group of plants grown by our industry is closer to reaching the elusive mass market than any I can think of except small foliage plants, a very high percentage being purchased by the customer for his own use. Possibly by cultivating this interest in annual plants we can influence them to want our other products the year around for their own use. These are the people we are thinking of for year-round flower sales for their own use.

There has been a natural spontaneous increase in demand for geraniums in the past few years which is no doubt linked to the thousands of new homes in every area and the desire to beautify the home grounds. The profusion of bright flower colors and attractive foliage of the geranium fit well with modern architecture and the popular home patio. Our customers today have a great desire for better living, something to make life more attractive, prestige, keeping up with the Jones', and variety, the need to do something different. These natural forces of our time will push the sale of geraniums. It is up to us to do the rest, keeping in mind the great amount of free publicity that this common everyday plant is getting.

Now to talk about selling from the retail standpoint. As I see it, the geranium, sales-wise, is once removed from the mass of other annuals, mostly by price. Even 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch plants are expensive compared to the dozen petunias. So 4-inch plants must have special consideration in our plant display.

The geranium sales area should be set off from the other annuals and each color separate with the price range distinct. Feature geraniums as accent plants in your display. It pays to grade 4-inch geraniums and again separate the best plants to sell at a higher price. Your customers are used to shopping--give them a chance. The small geranium plant (2 $\frac{1}{4}$ - or 3-inch) is gaining in sales at planting time. It is a rewarding purchase for the customer and a good profit item. Those who want big plants will have nothing short of big plants.

Keep in mind green-plant sales--that is 4-inch plants with buds just showing color or even tighter. A block of green plants in each color on display will draw a good many sales, with no price reduction as a rule. There is some call for planting urns and boxes, but the "do-it-yourself spirit" prevails; so be ready with the plant material.

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Early in the season retail sales are a problem to some of us. The first warm days of late April and early May will bring geranium customers. We have often been reluctant to make these sales because of the frosts that usually follow. Warnings always bring disappointment to both buyer and seller and what is saved in plants is lost in enthusiasm. So we have decided that this early geranium customer, like the early tomato gardener, is willing to take the chance to be first to plant out. Now we make the sale, keep everybody happy, and talk about the weather if the subject comes up. If he does lose his plants he gets a kick out of telling how he almost saved them when he comes back for more. Naturally, sound advice is in order if wanted.

From the wholesale standpoint, the demand for 4-inch geraniums continues strong. In season it seems only to be limited by weather conditions which are on the daily basis. The bulk of this spring pot plant is moving through nonflorist outlets. Modern garden centers, roadside stands, food stores, and nurseries are taking well over 50 percent of this crop either direct from the grower or through wholesale produce houses and curb markets. Although the 4-inch geranium is a greenhouse-pot-plant crop in its own right today, it remains primarily an annual outdoor plant which will not stand store conditions for more than 24 hours at a time.

Our wholesale commission florists might think of making connections with local geranium growers for delivery of plants to the customer on order. It works and is good business, especially when their out-of-town customers need geraniums.

In our locality 4-inch plants are generally packed 14 to a case. This is a convenient number for size and weight of the case. The cardboard-carrier-flat with a hole for each plant is very good, holding each plant upright and secure. Cardboard boxes cost twice as much as wooden skeleton flats made for marketing 4-inch geraniums. Wooden flats are satisfactory but take more care in handling.

I am very conscious of the value of selling green plants with buds just showing color and find that they move very well, especially on the wholesale market along with plants in full bloom. It helps to move the crop fast and profitably. It seems that most dealers want a few cases of buds when the demand for them is pointed out. Actually, when well taken care of, the seller has a longer sales period to depend on if needed.

Notes on Culture

The 4-inch plants are still the main crop. Some 3-inch and $2\frac{1}{4}$ -inch and a few 5-inch are grown. We still aim for May 30, but each year the first two weeks in June become more important as desire for home beautification spreads.

Spacing. Spacing is very important in the 4-inch crop. A good rule is 10 plants in 2 square feet. Think of the space as 6 x 48 inches. Pot on pot, as practiced by some, is risky for profitable plants.

Benches. The ideal growing surface is one into which roots cannot penetrate, yet one which holds moisture. Much care is needed with pots on soil to prevent rooting through. On wood, growing is difficult in hot weather. A shallow layer of sand or gravel over wood or concrete is ideal. Flats with liners are very practical. Flat asbestos cement board is one of the finest surfaces on which to grow 4-inch geraniums, with or without sand. Portable benches over ground beds--flat asbestos board on block--are practical.

Watering and Syringing. Water thoroughly after potting, then only when ball is dry. Water more heavily and more often after April 1. Syringing is O.K. in late spring between waterings before flowers appear, and then only on bright days or before and after feeding.

Pinching. To time the crop, hard pinch Feb. 1 to 20 or soft pinch up to March 10. Shape the plant any time a terminal growth is much longer than other breaks. Pinching is best done after plants are in 4-inch pots, but it is very practical to pinch $2\frac{1}{4}$ -inch stock or even calloused cuttings before potting if time is short.

Propagation. Bottom heat is the most important single factor in rooting cuttings. The sand should be 65° to 75° F. Stick the cutting 1 inch into the medium using a peg board or open slit. No tamping or bruising is needed. Direct potting is very practical with bottom heat. Snapping the cutting off the plant is preferable to a clean cut. Make the cut at or below the node. Uniform cutting size is important. Rooting hormones are beneficial but dilute $\frac{1}{2}$ with talc or charcoal. Shake off the excess as a light coating is best. Rooted cuttings can be placed in a ball of moss instead of soil to give desirable light-weight plants for shipping. Leaf bud cuttings produce vigorous, strong young plants in 12 to 16 weeks.

Soils and Fertilizers. A wide range is possible with a mixture of $\frac{1}{2}$ fibrous loam, $\frac{1}{2}$ peat, the most profitable mixture. A pH range of 5.5 to 6.5 is desirable. Use superphosphate in the proportion of 5 lbs. per cubic yard. For later feeding use a complete liquid fertilizer once a week after April 1 when the pots are full of roots. It is best to continue until May 15.

Light and Shade. Full light is needed in cold weather and up to May 1 in our area. Shade with whitewash about May 1 to 7, only after most buds are above foliage. A light shade applied twice is much better than one heavy one. Shade applied too early will result in blasted buds.

Heat. It is most profitable to start in February at a 55° F. night temperature-- 75° daytime. There is no advantage in carrying 4-inch plants at 45° to 50° F. for a long period. Long periods of low temperature tend to slow bud formation later.

Air. Provide as much air as possible and maintain 55° to 75° F. throughout the season. A once-a-day ventilation period in cold weather is beneficial.

Pots. Four-inch clay pots are most commonly used. Two and one quarter-inch peat pots are good. I have no experience with plastic and aluminum. Bird green pot is good; it takes the space of a clay pot.

Varieties. Color preference-- $\frac{2}{3}$ red, $\frac{1}{3}$ pink, white and novelty colors.

Red Fiat--orange-scarlet, full bloomer, big flower.

Imp. Ricard--brick red, a large flower on solid stems, very dependable.

Irene--very popular, great bloomer, shattering no problem.

Olympic Red--large clear red, needs much water, heavy wood.

Radio Red--dark red, tall, small, light wood.

Pride of Camden--darkest red, small wood, early flower, tall.

Salmon Supreme--light clear salmon, best of salmon pinks.

Fiat Enchantress--soft salmon pink, gray-green foliage, best pot plant, light pink.

Pink Fiat--soft salmon pink, self-branching plant.

Mme. Landry--a salmon pink of strong and heavy growth, late.

Apple Blossom--very large light pink, hardier than Fiat Enchantress as a rule.

Better Times--dark crimson or cerise, free bloomer, light green neat foliage.

Snow Ball--larger flowers, round leaf.

Mme. Buchner--early white, quick bloomer.

Breeding. I know that there is some breeding work being done and new varieties will soon be introduced. It seems to me that effort should be in the direction of more vigorous disease resistant varieties which will be more sturdy, stand more in the growing and marketing process and in home plantings. Let's bring the geranium indoors, too (your customers know the plant and want it), by developing varieties of a strain adapted to indoor conditions.