

Harvesting and Marketing Cut Flowers



THE cut-flower industry has been well established for many years in other countries, but only within recent years has it come into its own in New Zealand. Methods which have come to be accepted in the industry are described and advice offered to intending growers in this article by C. G. Aldridge, Horticultural Inspector, Department of Agriculture, Christchurch.

FOR certain phases of floral work—the making of wreaths, posies, and bouquets and the supply to hospitals, hotels, and shipping—the demand has varied little in New Zealand. Only a small percentage of the public buys these lines, and the future holds some promise for the industry if good-quality lines can be provided at prices which are an inducement to every housewife to have floral decorations in the home.

To do this the grower must use production methods which keep costs at a minimum, and the blooms must arrive at the markets fresh and attractive, which is probably the most important phase of flower production. A grower may be diligent, his gardens well cultivated, and his blooms perfect, but unless they arrive at the market still retaining their freshness they will bring only a second-grade price.

Many successful growers have developed an artistic sense which enables them to know just when and how to pick their blooms, how to handle them, and how to appreciate them. This brings its own rewards apart from remuneration.

Harvesting

The best time for cutting flowers is generally recognised as early morning or late afternoon. However, gladioli can be cut even in the heat of the day with no detrimental results if they are

placed in deep receptacles of cool water in a shady place.

Careful handling is essential to the harvesting of cut flowers. Rather than reach over the beds, with the possibility of damaging plants, harvesters should work beds from both sides.

Flowers should always be cut with stems as long as possible. For this reason, and also to prevent the sap from becoming a nuisance, narcissi are pulled instead of being cut and the stems are trimmed after they have been bunched.

With the exception of the everlastings, most flowers should be cut either in the bud or when the bud is about to open. Roses, poppies, lilliums, iris, and tulips are among those which should be cut in the bud; hyacinths, gladioli, narcissi, and stocks are among those which should be cut when the lower florets have opened. Cutting at these stages reduces damage during transport and ensures that the florist receives blooms having the longest possible life.

Grading

Some growers first pick all the top-grade blooms and then go over the beds again taking all the second-grade ones. This method is used mostly where labour is employed in the packing shed, but a grower who works on his own usually picks all suitable blooms at the one time and

grades them in the packing shed as the flowers are being bunched. Floral buyers very quickly come to know whether a grower is consistent in his grading. Buyers often visit markets before the auction begins and ask for lines of a certain grower—obviously because they know his lines.

Some men have been most successful growers in times of depression and in times of plenty, and the secret of their success is that they have become known for consistency in the quality of their lines. That does not mean that all their lines were of highest quality, but inferior blooms were never found squeezed in among their first grades to make up the number. Their second-grade blooms were up to a certain standard, and all below that standard never found their way to the market.

If the season is such that few flowers are of a high standard, a grower should not be tempted to mix inferior blooms with "specials" or short-stemmed flowers with the long-stemmed ones. They should be kept separate, for if a buyer notices one inferior bloom in a bunch, the quality of that bloom will determine the quality of his bid.

Bunching

Some growers advocate the use of a bunching cradle to facilitate the handling of the flowers. This cradle is simply made from a piece of wood 18 in. x 6 in. x 1 in. and a length of No. 8 fencing wire. The required number of flowers is placed on the



Heading photograph by Green and Hahn Ltd.