

An Overview of the Utah Cut Flower industry

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Approximately 80% of cut flowers used in the US are imported. The domestic flower industry has adapted to increases in inexpensive floral imports by focusing on the production of specialty flowers with short vase lives. Small-scale, domestic flower farmers typically sell stems wholesale to local florists or use direct to consumer markets like farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and you-pick operations. National membership in the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers has approximately quadrupled since 2008, to nearly 3,000 members. In the Inter-mountain West region of the US (Utah, Idaho, Nevada, western Colorado), cut flower farming is a rapidly growing niche industry. It attracts consumers with 'farm to vase' social media marketing approach. The Utah Cut Flower Farm Association (UCFFA) was formed in 2019 and now has over 145 members throughout the Inter-mountain region. Since the hiring of the Utah State University Small Farms Extension Specialist (2018), Utah has seen flower farms grow from 20+ operations to over 130 farms (Fig. 1) primarily in the highly urbanized regions around Salt Lake City.

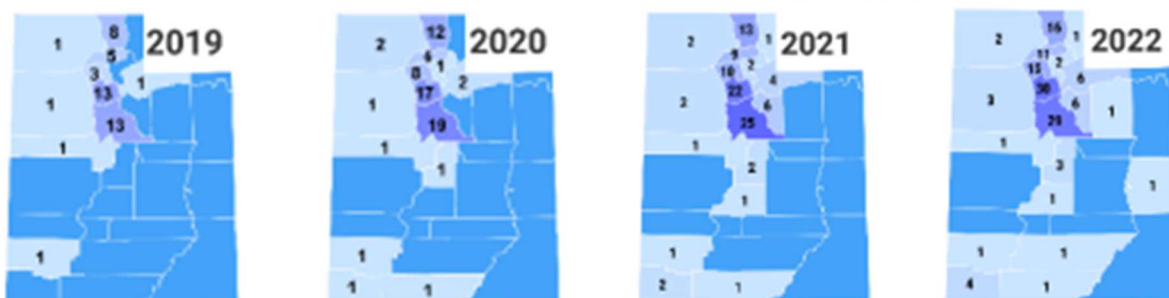


Figure 1. Utah Flower Farms by county; 2019 (47); 2020 (73); 2021 (102); 2022 (135).

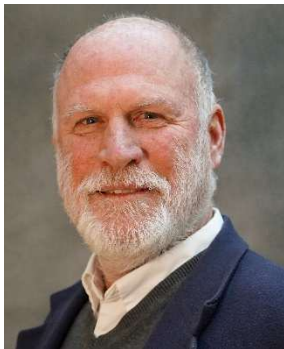
Flower farmers in Utah are predominantly new (<2 yrs. experience), very small (<½ A), and almost exclusively female (89%) farmers. Most had little or no contact with the Land-Grant institution (USU), did not know about Cooperative Extension, and gathered and applied production information from where it was available. USU did not have much relevant information to meet this group's needs. Since 2019, more than 15 unique guides detail the production and economics of cut flowers and address the shortfall in materials tailored to local needs (<https://extension.usu.edu/productionhort/cut-flowers/index>). Developed products includes a mix of production, management, and cost/return estimates for a variety of annual/perennial and cool/warm season flowers.

Recent surveys with the industry noted that social media is the primary vehicle used to access agricultural information (36% preference) over other sources like Extension fact sheets (32%). Within social media platforms, growers use Instagram (58%), followed by Facebook (33%), other (6%), and Twitter (3%). An Instagram-based extension campaign was launched by the Small Farms specialist to share research updates, provide timely alerts for farm management, promote extension events, and, most importantly, connect local flower farmers. An extension account around [flowers](#) created identity, conveyed expertise in a focused area, and increases followers and engagement. Timely content

(relevant seasonal posts) are useful to farmer followers and further increase engagement. Themed posts effectively shared extension content. For example, “Fact Sheet Fridays” promotes important Extension oriented materials with a fresh photo and action-oriented caption (like: vegetable growing guides during local planting times). Occasional posts that highlight personal experiences, feelings, and challenges within the niche also boosted credibility and engagement.

Following flower farmers on their personal social media platforms helped inform extension on the needs across the state. Information gathered helped direct team efforts (program adjustments), helped identify farms/farmers, and focused the creation of outreach materials. Crop information (e.g., crop types, varieties), the timing of farm practices (fall/spring), market preferences for agricultural products, and real-time challenges (drought/heat/pests) were monitored. From this, outreach has ranged from troubleshooting problems and created opportunities for Extension to address these issues. Instagram helped identify new clientele (farms) and quantify program relevance to targeted groups. Here in Utah, Instagram has been critical to discovering the rapidly growing number of new, urban, female-run farms (Fig. 1). Local, state, regional and national funding sources have helped support the efforts and provided resources for heavy student involvement.

Student engagement and training in extension was facilitated by Instagram, which furthered awareness, critical thinking, communication skills, and research documentation. USU students maintaining flower research trials were tasked with thinking about key fieldwork each week and emerging study highlights, then creating the appropriate posts with representative digital imagery and captioning. This led to greater project investment, ability to relate day-to-day operations to broader implications, and learning how to communicate with varying audiences.



Dr. Daniel Drost is a Professor of Horticulture and Extension Vegetable Specialist in the Department of Plants, Soils and Climate. Dr. Drost grew up on a small farm in western Michigan and has graduate degrees from Michigan State and Cornell University. His research program focuses on sustainable vegetable production systems and improving productivity by the use of new and novel technologies. His interest in flowers production stems from his work on high tunnels, high value agriculture, and growth optimization in highly managed environments.