

Zinnias: 'My No. 1 Moneymaker'

Don G. Campbell

Zinnias could provide your company with just the right niche if your goal is to grow a flowering summer plant that builds customer loyalty and is not commonly found on the retail market. Zinnias require a moderate amount of care, but they give customers long-lasting rainbows of summer color.

Eight inch pots are instant hits, Greg Blankenship, owner of Gregory's Dogwood Nursery in Knoxville, TN, said.

"I started growing zinnias in 1989. Since the very beginning, retail outlets (local garden centers) have been begging me to grow as many as I can, which is about 4,000 8 inch pots and 3,000 4 inch pots," he said. "I usually grow my 4 inch early in the spring so that customers can take them and plant them directly into their gardens. The 8 inch are usually sold later in the season because they have to be pinched."

Blankenship has been growing only the Dreamland zinnia series because he has found success with it. "I haven't experimented with any of the other cultivars," he said.

Perfect Impulse Items

Blankenship said zinnias can offer a solid income to the small grower who has limited space. "Talk about your impulse sales! They sell as fast as I can get them off the truck," he said



Greg Blankenship says potted zinnias can offer solid income to the small grower with limited space. These 8-inch pinched pots are usually sold in the summer.

Being the only local provider of this crop, Blankenship has established a wholesale price of \$3.25 per 8 inch pot and has a \$1 per-unit cost. His plants retail between \$5.99 and \$6.99. Blankenship doesn't grow any zinnias in cell packs because he has not found them to be as profitable as the 4 and 8 inch pot plants.

No. 1 Moneymaker

Blankenship tries to have his first crop ready before Mother's day and offers his zinnias through the end of August.

"If I'm lucky and get things out, I try to shift four crops through the greenhouse plus all of the other bedding plants that

I grow," he said. "It prolongs the season all the way up until September, when the poinsettias and pansies take up space."

Blankenship grows 10,000 4 inch annuals, and about 8,000 flats of 3601s.

"Zinnias are definitely my No. 1 moneymaker," he said. "I guess my satisfaction in growing zinnias is seeing how pleased and surprised people are when they find something so beautiful in the middle of summer," Blankenship said.

"There are a lot of growers who are not growing these, and I think they are missing out on this crop."

Don G. Campbell is a freelance writer in Knoxville, TN

Zinnias 101

Potted zinnias have minimal maintenance requirements

For Greg Blankenship, a crop of potted zinnias is typically ready for market 8 to 10 weeks after being sown, meaning seeds sown in mid-May are ready for July sales. Blankenship offered these suggestions for growing zinnias:

Potting: Plant in 4 to 8 inch pots. Zinnias grow best in a fertile growing medium.

Greenhouse Conditions: Grow zinnias in a well-ventilated greenhouse under a light intensity of 6,000 to 8,000 footcandles. They should be grown at night air temperatures of 58F to 62F and day air temperatures of 68F to 72F. During germination, the medium temperature should be between 70F to 75F. Germination will occur in four to seven days. Seeds will germinate poorly if the medium temperature drops below 60F.

Heat Control: Pinch once and treat with B-Nine growth regulator once.

Pest Management: Powdery mildew usually isn't a problem even in humid Tennessee. "Bitrytis and rust are the biggest problems in the greenhouse," Blankenship said. "I have some I planted outside this past spring and I haven't encountered any disease problems." He recommends spraying with an approved fungicide and insecticide.



The color availability of zinnias is an added attraction, Greg Blankenship says.

Zinnias' wide range of colors ideal for decorating

East Tennessee grower Greg Blankenship said that zinnias wide array of colors makes them popular for special occasions.

"I provide customers with pots of mixed colors as well as solids. These make for a very marketable display."

"Here in the University of Tennessee's Big Orange Country, orange and white flowering plants are great fall sellers."

"We put zinnias inside a mall for the opening UT football game. We used orange and white zinnias, and they still looked good after 14 days in the mall display when they were properly taken care of."