

# How to grow flowers for profit

Proper farming practices at a flower farm conserves the environment and also rakes in millions to the farmer and foreign exchange for the government, writes Denis Bbosa.

According to French poet Antoine de Saint-Exupéry; it is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important. Make no mistake, growing roses - even with a limitless market home and abroad - is a no-go zone for the faint hearted and deprived.

Yet with concerted efforts between government and interested individuals, the nascent lucrative industry can be harnessed to tap into the overflowing fortunes.

Flower expert Ravi Kumar, who is also the farm manager of Namulanda based Rosebud flower company calls on prospective farmers to join the trade since the local market is still virgin and the environment is favourable.

"Uganda is a country blessed with fertile soils, abundant water resources and labour. Individual farmers can start as a small group and gradually grow into organisations that can serve the demanding market," he says.

Currently, Rosebud is the country's largest exporter of roses, but Kumar admits they would be exporting more than the three times they do a week if the supply was equally high.

"In Kenya, they export daily because floriculture production is high unlike here in Uganda where it is a few companies like us venturing in the business," said Kumar.

Sitting on 60 hectares and with 60 green houses, Rosebud exports flowers to the Amsterdam (Holland) market hub of 21 countries thrice a week (Tuesday, Friday and Sunday).

They are searching for 200 hectares next to a water source to extend their business and meet the high demand.

## Daily harvest project

No many agribusiness ventures can give daily returns like growing flowers.

One needs to follow cardinal laws like not exposing flowers to direct sunshine and making sure they are irrigated daily and given fertilisers.

"Mainly for the up and running firms such as Rosebud, once the Green House (polythene housing that gives shelter to flowers) is up, and the flower troughs are constructed and are irrigated by a modern, automated water-pumping unit, which feeds our fully computerised hydroponics systems," explains Kumar who is surrounded by a bevy of workers.

## Growing

The flower takes only 35 days to mature. One square meter produces a flower every day for 350 days and it takes five years to replenish the entire plantation.

The flower plant is left with no option but to produce yields after being granted about 15 types of nutrients, coconut fertilisers and watered 10 times daily in the durable



# 365

THE DAYS FARMERS HARVEST THE ROSE FLOWER AT NAMULANDA

made polythene troughs.

"The trough, water and nutrients ensure that the flower's roots do not meander looking for food but only concentrate on production of roses. If you follow the rules to the dot, you are sure of harvesting flowers more than once a daily because it takes a flower two hours to produce another ready rose."

## Greenhouse technology

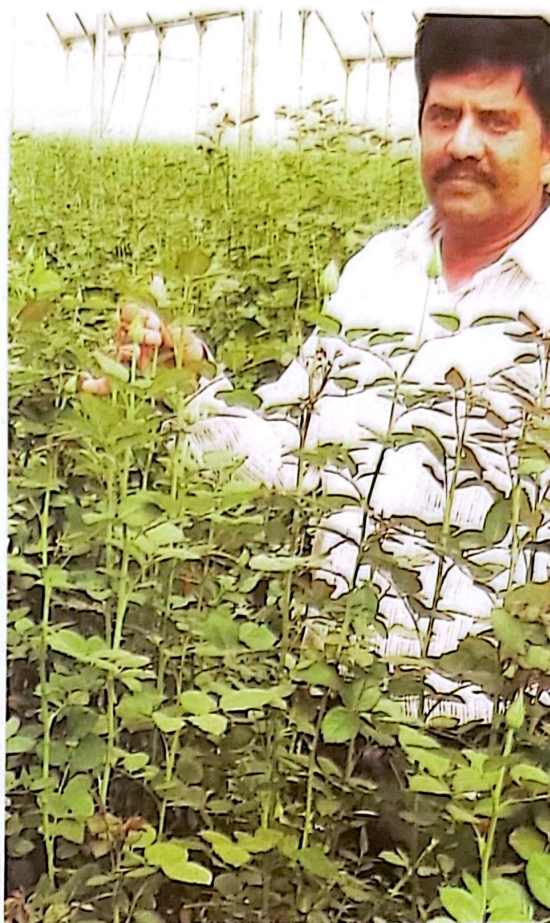
The polythene that covers the greenhouse helps in ultra-filtration from the sun by throwing back light. It is anti-algae, anti-dew and does allow vapour to form in the spacious house.

"At our farm, we harvest 365 days a year and we collect flowers from the green houses three times a day. We raise our own seedlings and we train workers for six months to be able to comprehend how the business is done," says Kumar, a graduate of Tamilnadu Agriculture University with a MSC in Agriculture who has been farm manager for the last 13 years.

## Pests, disease inspection

Once the flowers arrive at the grading house from the greenhouse, they are subject to a disease inspection check at the entrance, taken for trimming and packaging before they head to the five degrees cooler room ready for transportation.

"In the cooler room, the fresh flowers are put into coma for hours and 'resurrected' briefly while packing into the vans and then put back into coma on the plane to Europe," Kumar expounds.



Kumar explains the growth of a rose flower in a greenhouse. PHOTOS BY DENIS BBOSA

## TOP FIVE PROFITABLE FLOWERS

Cut flowers are one of the most profitable plants for small growers, with sales of up to Shs100m per acre.

Cut flowers are a perfect cash crop, because they are easy to grow, produce quickly and can supply a good income throughout the growing season.

Also, startup costs are low, as most gardeners already have the basic gardening tools needed, and only have to buy seeds to get started.

According to seasoned flower growing pros, the best flower choices to insure profits include:

1. **Ageratum.** Clusters of long-lasting flowers in red, white and blue add color to bouquets. With successive plantings, ageratum can produce continuous blooms from early summer to frost.

## Protection of farm workers

All the flower farms should ensure that every worker accessing the greenhouse is well protected with full protective gear including gumboots, eye goggles, gloves, overall, gumboots, and face masks.

This enables workers to remain safe and work for the farm for a long time without falling sick from diseases resulting from use of toxic chemicals.

"All the banned chemicals should

2. **Scabiosa.** Also called the pincushion flower, scabiosa is excellent for cutting and comes in a wide variety of colors, from white to dark. As with most cut flowers, plant every 2-3 weeks until mid-summer for extended bloom harvest.

3. **Larkspur.** This relative of the buttercup has complex flowers and comes in a wide range of colors. Most seed suppliers offer color assortments so you'll have a rainbow of blooms to harvest and mix into bouquets.

4. **Snapdragon.** Best to start indoors and transplant. Snapdragons take 120 days to mature. Most growers plant a mix of 8-10 colors for variety.

5. **Peony.** With hundreds of varieties of this popular perennial, the hardest decision may be which ones to plant! The large fragrant flowers are always a hit at the Saturday market.

Headstart Publishing

## Advice

A prospective farmer must also be ready to train a worker for close to six months yet that worker may easily lose interest in working on the farm and opt for 'white collar' jobs.

The local market is still down because of the conservative nature of Ugandans towards flowers (mostly cherished during burial moments) yet in Europe a man will first buy flowers before buying bread.

## Makerere trains flower students

Makerere University Agricultural Research Institute (MUARIK) head Dr Stephen Lwasa reveals that the Horticulture three-year degree at Makerere University attracts 20 students a year and is divided in many categories, flowers, fruits and vegetables.

"Students specialise in any of the ventures and we have many joining floriculture farms such as Rosebud and Naimba Estates." Lwasa brands floriculture as a capital intensive upcoming industry that inquires extensive farming and importation of seedlings - a preserve for the rich.

"The best thing government can do is give able investors incentives such as tax holiday on flights and get them land near water as well as negotiating with Nema to degazette some swampy areas for flower farming."

(bright red), Meera (champagne), Akito (white), Blushing Akito (pink), Raspberry King (dark red), Jambo (bright red) and Intermediate Roses; Ace Pink (pink), Bella Rose (pink), Sunny Star (yellow), Furiosa (dark red), Tropical Amazone (orange), Banjo (pink), Labelle (peach), Sorraya (yellow), Athena (white).

According to Kumar, the Blushing Akito breed, is the most sought after rose on the European market for its fragrance and pink attractive colour.

## Challenges

Kumar says that the caterpillars and spider mites pose a threat but through use of mosquito nets, specialised lights and the promone trap they have managed to tame them.

The promone trap uses a smelling tablet that attracts the male butterflies that could have fertilised the female into a death trap thus wiping away the entire breed.

"The other challenge is Europeans dictating the conditions because they sell to us the raw materials at high prices, buy the products at fluctuating prices and call for less use of chemicals yet some diseases require them to avoid making losses," he notes.

## Watching environment

Flowers are very profitable but also could be harmful to the environment and lakes if farmers do not follow guidelines from authorities.

Chemicals should not be allowed to drain in any open water body.

The drainage channels from the greenhouse should be made in such a way that they pour all the draining chemicals from the greenhouse into one area well prepared for handling chemicals and fertilisers.