



**Island Flower Growers Co-operative
Frequently Asked Questions for Guest Growers
February 2023**

1. What does the Co-op's weekly workflow for growers entail?

Sunday

~ **Noon deadline:** Enter projected crop info into the group availability spreadsheet so our Manager can research and set prices, and so she knows what info to pass on to our Communications Manager for the preview that goes out to our clients Monday morning.
~ If possible or preferred, growers start entering their products into our Open Food Network market platform, trying to be accurate with how many bunches available.

Monday

~ A.M. Growers re-check their inventory numbers and update photos.
~ Market Manager distributes pricelist and any harvest notes.
~ **Noon deadline:** growers load the OFN shop. All product, prices, photos and descriptions have to be finished, no late additions. Growers are available for questions until shop opens.
~ Shop opens at **4 p.m.**
~ Manager sends growers a preliminary cut list for orders that have sold by **6 p.m.** (typically, most of our sales happen in the first half hour).

Tuesday

~ **9 a.m. deadline:** Growers restock the shop if able and needed; this info is included in a note to clients in the morning.
~ **Shop closes at 11.**
~ **By noon:** Manager sends growers a final cut list—with client names attached.
~ Growers harvest, wrap, label, and store orders.

Wednesday

~ Growers load their vehicles and proceed to the Luxton Fairgrounds sorting hub for **7:30-8 a.m. arrival.**
~ All growers help to fill buckets with water and place them in designated client spots.
~ by **8:30 deadline:** Growers place their labelled product into the appropriate buckets and help each other as needed.
~ **Manager arrives at 8:30** and checks each order. Growers are available for questions, corrections, quality concerns.
~ Delivery driver arrives at about **9:30** and loads



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2. Is it feasible for a Guest Grower to make a profit? I'm concerned that the 35% commissions and \$100 fee might make it hard to come out on top.

Member-Owners also pay commissions of between 20% and 30%, and our initial investment was \$500.00. As we enter our 4th year, we can say that we wouldn't still be participating, and the Co-op wouldn't exist, if we weren't happy about our numbers!

But "profitability" will mean something different for each grower. In general, "profit" is the difference between the cost of production (including all inputs) and the acceptable mark-up the farmer sets for each crop. Each farm should maintain careful enterprise budgets for individual crops to track whether they're realizing their acceptable level of profit; the data doesn't lie. Without knowing the cost of growing, there's no way to know whether your prices are keeping up.

All members have multiple sales channels to support our businesses and have found that selling wholesale through the Co-op is not only profitable but very rewarding. We gain back time when not having to contact clients individually, deliver our own sales sometimes several times a week, generate a fresh sheet and guess at prices. Our time is more sustainably spent being farmers: planning and seeding crops, managing our soils and habitats, making sure irrigation and pest management get the attention they need, and resting our minds and bodies regularly. And so the "cost of production" has also gone way down. And the co-op employs respected experts to look after pricing, communication and delivery, among other things. Happier clients also lead to more consistent sales.

3. I haven't grown flowers for wholesale before, but I want to learn from the Co-op while I begin selling. What do I need to know?

The Co-op's clients have come to expect stems that are as close to Grade A as possible, as well as specialty varieties that they can't find elsewhere. Unfortunately, we're not able to provide ongoing training or educational opportunities; we need experienced growers who either have experience selling wholesale to florists, or who have experience receiving wholesale flowers for their own floral business and have grown flowers in the past. We're not able to help very new growers to understand concepts such as vase life, harvest stage, and stem length, or to provide professional development for those building a flower farm for the first time. It's a great time to be starting out, since the on-line world offers so many excellent opportunities to learn, and serious growers around the world are publishing books that offer inspiration and explanation.

We suggest that new growers purchase a Grower Friend Pass for a season. This will give you access to our weekly pricelists and standardization notes, as well as viewing access to our on-line market each week. You'll see what we grow, you'll see photos of our product harvested at its proper stage, and you'll get a sense of how you might think about pricing for your retail sales channels while you do the trial-and-error work to learn about growing under your conditions.



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4. Do you provide a standardized list of requirements for each kind of flower so new growers know what's expected?

Knowing and understanding standards can be a long and slow learning curve! When we enter our product into the availability projection sheet on Sunday, we're asked to indicate stem length there; if the Manager has concerns, she'll note them on Monday morning, when growers receive a detailed pricelist that includes any harvest notes and preferred stem length. This info should be considered cumulative: hold onto these lists so that you already know how tall snapdragons, for example, should be and how many florets should be open vs. closed. But this, too, is a work in progress for the co-op.

We all continue to undertake our own research and professional development to understand optimal harvest stage, starting with resources such as the Floret seed shop and books, or the recommendations listed on the Johnny's site. If you're very new to growing and don't yet understand the principles of harvest stage, it would be wise for you to undertake a year of growing and note-taking before trying to sell wholesale to florists.

5. Is there an opportunity to join the community of IFGC for a season before joining as a Guest Grower?

The best way to gather information about our market season is with a Grower Friend Pass which provides access to our weekly pricelists and standardization notes, and viewing access to our online shop. As well, if you'd like to join us at our Luxton Fairgrounds sorting hub, just let us know, and we'll make sure you have an opportunity to watch what we're doing and chat with those taking part. We always welcome cheerful folks willing to fill our buckets with water!

All of our growers are always learning; the weekly sort is an opportunity to chat with other growers about the trials and tribulations of growing flowers, and we do our best to help each other meet the highest standards while also being understanding of the challenges.

As well, we're planning a couple of events there to welcome new growers to bring examples of the product they might wish to sell, and to get feedback from Members and our Manager. Dates TBA!

6. When during the season is supply not meeting demand?

In general, the demand has exceeded our supply at almost every time of the season. Our clients are adept at improvising with the product we have on hand, but they've let us know they need higher volumes of virtually everything we offer. We'd prefer to have items leftover in the shop each week, knowing clients were able to find the quantities they needed.

This has varied for us year to year, as our clients have grappled with the limitations of the pandemic response. In general, growers experience an overall lull in June when clients need material for June weddings and graduations. And we never seem to have enough dahlias in August in the desirable forms and colours. We would love to offer more woodies and flowering woodies more consistently and in greater variety—hydrangea, viburnum etc. Anything in white and cream and blush should always have a place in the shop.



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These patterns have shifted at least a little every year for us. Our first market is mid-April, and our growers don't offer significant variety at that time, and weddings haven't yet ramped up. That said, 2022 had a late Easter, and we were able to provide bulbs and ranuncus to meet that demand. Our season typically flies into full gear by Mother's Day. June is often very busy with events and graduations. July and August can be somewhat muted. There can be a slow week once school is back in September, and then Thanksgiving is another high-volume week.

Our growers have been planning and adjusting their plans to try and supply more varieties and quantities for June. Cold-season annuals grown in tunnels, as well as over-wintered crops in tunnels (see Johnny's excellent videos on this) are ultimately what we need.

This season, we'll be compiling a list of items we anticipate being short of so that we can give our Guest Growers more guidance. But each season is unpredictable.

7. Will I have a mentor to help me navigate all of this?

Once a grower has completed the Guest Grower Interest Form on the website, and we think they may be a good fit for the co-op based on the info they're shared, we'll pair them with a Member who will do a farm visit. Once a grower is approved and their Guest Grower Fee has been processed, we'll assign a Member who'll provide support throughout the season.

8. What is OFN?

The co-op sells on the Open Food Network platform (openfoodnetwork.ca), an open-source system that serves farmers worldwide. OFN provides us with excellent support and troubleshooting, as well as knowledgeable administration support by folks who understand growing, and growing flowers in particular.

Island Flower Growers is registered as the "hub" through which each of our farms sells wholesale. We're each registered as an "enterprise" and for an additional fee, may also sell our own farm's product.

9. I already sell wholesale to clients in the Victoria area. Could I still do that? Would I have to pay a commission on those sales?

One of the Co-op's founding principles was the belief that our sector of the local wholesale market would benefit from shared resources, from growers working together to streamline ordering, delivery and communication for our clients. Founding members had been individually selling wholesale to florists for many years and believed that by sharing client lists and sharing the commitment to improving both product and distribution system, we'd all benefit. Growers would have more time to farm; florists would have more time to design with better quality stems. Less driving for everyone, less time writing and responding to emails.

Vancouver Island has had an influx of new flower farmers in the past few years, and we still believe this can present inefficiencies and unnecessary issues for the whole sector. More than ever, we're committed to those founding principles.



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That said, we know how difficult it can be to forge and maintain those relationships, and we don't want to interfere with the way small farmers have built their businesses. It's a fantastic time to be a florist in our region! IFGC's policy is that Guest Growers are welcome to continue their pre-existing relationships with our clients. If the Co-op's resources are used to market or distribute that product, then a commission would be processed. As well, we ask that Guest Growers respect the time and effort it's taken to build our own client list. Our Guest Grower Policies include guidelines to do with confidentiality and the sharing of IFGC's information without permission.

10. When would be a good time to take a photo of a new product?

It's important that photos we post on our sales platform each week depict accurately what our clients will receive and provide them with visual information. Sometimes that means taking a new photo on Monday morning if colour or openness has changed, or making sure that during the week—when the grower has time and patience—gathering a representative bunch and taking a photo. Members keep a designated photo area set up so that it's easy and efficient to take photos whenever practical. (The co-op has put together a guide to taking photos for our shop that Guest Growers are given.)

Sometimes, this means harvesting the first few stems from a crop just coming into production and taking a photo early in the week so that we have it on hand, whether we sell that bunch or not.

A crop such as strawflower, for example, needs updated. Early in the season, these are harvested with 2 layers of petals open, but later, they may have open centres that are a different colour. Our clients need to know that, and the photo shows them what they'll be ordering.

11. I'm a micro grower, would I be able to grow enough flowers to commit to the Co-op as a guest grower?

Many of us are micro-growers, too, and we want you to get the most out of your limited space. We typically offer our clients 5-stem bunches of specific varieties: *5 stems of Strawflower 'Silver Rose'*, for example. Most of them will be looking for multiple bunches, but not always. And if more than one grower has the same product, clients can often find the numbers they need. At this time we don't expect a minimum contribution—either over the season or each week—but Guest Growers should weigh their potential sales against the time and (potentially) travel involved.

For that one bunch of strawflower, for example, you'd need to decide exactly how many stems you'll have available at the right harvest stage, take a photograph to depict that, post the product on the platform, then if it's sold, you'll wrap it, label it, transport it to Luxton, place it into the client's bucket and wait to hear from the Manager in case of a problem with standards. And remember, too, that the Co-op's resources—members who do this work as volunteers—will be used to record your sale and to make sure you're paid for it.



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12. Is it better to grow more of one thing than lots of small bits?

This depends on each grower's circumstances and access to growing space. For some of us, growing many crops in small quantities—especially specialty stems with a short harvest window—is the only way to be assured of high prices and continuous sales on a small and quirky space. For those with lots of space for long rows, more quantity of a few crops—those with a longer harvest window—makes the most sense, especially since so many of our clients need things in high volume over multiple weeks. And our clients include farmer florists, retail florists with small shops, studio designers with weekly subscriptions, and event florists: they all have different needs in terms of volume, and their needs change every week. But in general, larger volumes of a few crops will provide a grower with a more efficient workflow.

13. Do I need a flower cooler?

We don't require one, but your workflow will be much easier with one. And there are times of the season when product would need to be harvested the evening before delivery if you don't have a cooler. During the heat dome of 2021, there was no way to hold a harvest stage and crops were blowing in the field. It's impossible to sell tulips wholesale without one because you need to be able to hold them in quantity for a couple of weeks post-harvest; likewise peonies and ranuncs. It's all about maximizing vase life for our clients. Product they get on Wednesday has to hold up until the weekend at least.

Most of us use a Coolbot system (see the Johnny's site for more info) and have simply framed in and insulated spaces in basements, sheds, or spare rooms. Strategic use of vertical space helps expand capacity.

14. Do you limit the number of growers participating each season?

Each year, with the help of a business consultant who has expertise in co-operatives, we do a thorough season review and develop a plan for the next season. At that time, we assess our needs and how we'll respond to them. We make sure the co-op has the resources to support existing and new growers, and that we don't become too ambitious or grow too quickly. So year to year, we may limit how many new Members we accept. But we don't currently have limits on the number of participating Guest Growers. In past seasons, these folks tend to be active only during specific times of the season, so we still need to fill gaps that might exist, while also respecting the relationships we're building. And we want to be as sure as we can that our system works for growers, and that those growers are a good fit for the co-op. This year, we'll close Guest Grower applications March 31 in order to stabilize our list of growers right from the start.



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15. Is it possible for growers north of Nanaimo to participate as Guest Growers?

We welcome applications from all growers on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. Please consider carefully how you'll follow the Co-op's policies and meet all deadlines with the added commute.

Since we began, we've encouraged growers up and down the island, and on the Gulf Islands, to collaborate and carpool in order to take part in our weekly market. We've included them in planning sessions, shared resources and contacts, and welcomed them into our community. We've been told that the travel required isn't something they're able to do, and we understand that. Small farms need to produce enough product to cover the travel costs and still realize profit. Growers with young families have their own challenges.

As well, each year we've welcomed floral clients from north of Nanaimo and have done whatever we could to arrange affordable and convenient delivery, incurring significant losses last year on those deliveries while the anticipated sales didn't materialize.

We're a small business, early in our development, and one that's operated by the volunteer labour of our grower-owners and part-time staff. We've learned how important it is for a business such as ours to allocate resources conservatively and to avoid unnecessary risk. Despite all of our best efforts to facilitate the growers we admire and our loyal clients north of Duncan, 80% of our sales are made to clients from Duncan and south; and 85% of our product is supplied by growers who farm from Cobble Hill south. We'll continue to try and find ways to shift those proportions, and we still hope that new growers from up-island will find a way to fit their farms into our system.

16. Has the co-op considered creating a chapter for the mid-north Island?

In order to create another hub for the Co-op, and for growers and clients in that area, we would need to cover the cost of a Manager, a Communications Manager, and a delivery driver: these are positions we consider vital to the Co-op's health, professionalism, and growth, and it's taken a lot of effort to make sure we have the right people on board. At this time, and given what we've learned over the years, the potential sales likely wouldn't cover the costs. And we don't currently have a Member north of Nanaimo to provide oversight for our grower-owners.

We're still happy to connect like-minded folks who've reached out to us, in the hope that some shared, consistent transport system can come about. In the meantime, we encourage growers there to perhaps form a working group to look at other options for all of you to collaborate and serve your clients.

Many of you already have a loyal client base, and some have years of experience selling wholesale flowers already. Watch for grants through the Ministry of Agriculture or your municipal governments to fund a consultant to study the feasibility and viability of starting a collective or co-op in your region. BCCOOP's "Cultivating Co-ops" guide is a useful resource for any group considering this kind of collaboration, whether the co-op model is the best for you or not. It's a mind-boggling amount of work to organize and incorporate, and not everyone is suited to working collaboratively. But we know many of the excellent growers up-island, and they're famous for their passion and determination.



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17. I want to commit to being a Guest Grower for 2023. What's next?

When we receive your Interest Form to become a Guest Grower, and we determine your farm would be a good fit, we'll arrange for a Member to visit, either in person or virtually. We may have questions or concerns, and we'll be able to give an educated assessment as to whether the Co-op is a good fit for your farm this season. If we think it likely is, we'll ask you to submit the \$100 fee, and then we'll start the process of integrating you into the system, including a list of things we're confident the Co-op will need more of this year.

Applications close March 31 and fees must be received before our first market.

18. If we have questions, where should we reach out?

Please feel welcome to send along questions to info@islandflowergrowers.ca or to be in touch with any of our members. You'll find their contact info on our website.



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