



**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've found that 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 we employ respected experts to look after pricing, communication and delivery, among other things. Happier clients also leads to more consistent sales.

3. 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.

4. 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.



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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!

5. 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 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.

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 ranuncs 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.

6. 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, 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 will provide support throughout the season.



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7. 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.

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

It’s important that the photos we post on our sales platform each week depict accurately what our clients will receive and also provide them with as much visual information as possible. 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 photos during the season. 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.

9. 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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10. 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. And our clients are 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. In general, larger volumes of a few crops will provide a grower with a more efficient workflow.

11. 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 day 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.

12. 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.

13. 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, we'll arrange for a Member to visit your farm, 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.



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14. 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.



Updated February 1, 2023