

MAKING THE HOBBY PAY FOR ITSELF

Two things about gladiolus growing, especially as it becomes an all-absorbing hobby, makes it unusual as hobbies go. In the first place, the avid collector of cultivars can eventually hope to bring it into his collection despite its introductory price, and the hobby is one that can with fair ease pay for itself.

Many hobbies such as stamp collecting, coin collection or the collection of antiques, have a way of being somewhat discouraging to a person of no better than average means. In such fields as these, the rarer more desirable items have a tendency to become ever more expensive. The rare stamp or coin, for instance, keeps going up in price almost endlessly. If it is beyond the reach of a collector at a given moment it may always be and the enthusiast will be forever plagued with the thought that the treasure he most desires probably will be unobtainable. With the gladiolus, on the other hand, the exact reverse is true. The collector may find at a given time that a new and rare cultivar is beyond his means. Deciding that the price at the time is beyond what he can afford to pay he can rest assured that eventually the price is going to come down to his level. As the supply is increased through propagation the price goes down. With gladiolus, they can fulfill your dream, and they will not doom the hobbyist to defeat in the end. In this field, supply ultimately catches up with demand, while in many other hobbies, it may never do so. At one time a newly introduced gladiolus brought hundreds of dollars. Today most catalogers introduce cultivars at the \$5.00 to \$7.00 level. This makes the new introductions very affordable.

In the 1940, 50's and 60's, making a good living growing gladiolus was easily possible. Today with the importing of inexpensive gladiolus from outside the United States, it has become a side income for most. With the busy lifestyle of most individuals, it has become less profitable for most growers, a hobby where they can make some spare income. The hobbyist may earn enough either to make for himself a reasonable profit, or to enable him to indulge himself in the hobby in ways he would not be able was there not some extra income from the venture itself. Some who have started making the hobby pay for itself will find that they want to make it a life work. That should come only after they have made a sound beginning, and they have gained experience, for many, after an early retirement.

As in any field of endeavor, ingenuity will be a very helpful ingredient in the business of making the gladiolus hobby pay for itself. The present discussion will be limited to the more obvious ways of gaining that end. The most ready sources of income are from the sale of flowers, the sale of propagated stock and the development and sale of new cultivars to a cataloger. One deeply steeped in gladiolus lore may occasionally sell an article to a magazine or the gardening sections of the newspapers. If he gains a good reputation and supplements this with colored slides for a presentation, he may occasionally find himself booked for a garden club lecture. Most avid growers lecture just to spread the information and enjoyment of growing gladiolus. Garden clubs and organizations usually pay a very small honorarium to speakers, not making it a money making proposition. Some conferences will pay travel and lodging. Still, it is the enthusiast that just wants to spread the glad word that will find the proposition attractive, not necessarily profitable. Worth mentioning also is the prize money attained by exhibiting gladiolus at shows. Here again, if much travel is involved, the prize money obtained will usually just cover the cost of your enjoyment. A

much steadier progress can be assured in the field of selling and we will pay some attention to ways of attaining success in this way.

At the height of the gladiolus blooming season, you may sell the excessive quantities of glads to the wholesale cut-flower markets. Nevertheless, at this time, others are also flooding the market with inexpensive glads. With the great units of glads coming from the large growers during the Summer months, at very low prices, finding a local market for the small grower is best. Large growers with one hundred to one thousand acres and more, pre-contract their blooms and can set prices low because of the large volume of cuts they sell. Local markets can be florists, roadside stands, farmer markets, grocery stores or a few buckets of gladiolus setting in your front lawn. Some of you may never have considered selling gladiolus and will require a good share of selling ability to build up your clientele. These markets are virtually untouched and are just waiting for you to fill. While the flowers in season can be obtained by the florist from the wholesale market, experience will show that he can receive higher quality and get more variety of color and type, if he can obtain his supply from a local source. It may be that some florists are a little slow to learn this fact, and a few will buy on price alone. Most progressive florists, however, will welcome an opportunity to purchase first-class blooms locally and are willing to pay a fair price for them. I myself have picked up most local florist trade by providing free samples. Convincing someone to buy is nearly impossible, without first showing them your product and quality. Sometimes it takes persistence. I delivered a free bucket of glads to one florist three weeks in a row, he thought it would be too much bother to purchase from me instead of having them delivered by the wholesaler with the rest of his flower order. The fourth week, after appreciating the colors and quality he had never seen before, he purchased thirty bunches and is now a regular customer.

You will find that picking with two to four florets open will be best and a cooler to store them in will help you have less waste. Buyers at a farmer's market will want bright, unusual and mixed colors in a bunch of five or six. Florists are accustomed to buying in bunches of ten and a single color, usually in tight bud (none open.) They prefer groups of five or ten of one color, for baskets and bouquets. They generally always break off the tips and need to be taught to take off florets on the bottom if there are too many open or ones starting to fade. My florists have learned that they can purchase ones with six or seven open, but will also order bunches with less open to use later in the week. If you can provide a florist with an unusual color or ruffing, he will normally welcome the opportunity to use something different. He would prefer not to have his arrangements look like every other arranger in town. You can provide much fresher and undamaged blooms than can be found through a wholesaler, where handlers and shipping have taken its toll. There are many localities where such a market for quality cut-flower gladiolus exists and where no grower is supplying the need. Most large growers of flowers will naturally have to think in terms of the large city markets when making their shipments. The hobbyist on the other hand, may find a ready sale for what he can produce with the florist of the smaller localities. The grower should determine first how many blooms he can supply. There he may want to assure himself of a steady market by contacting from one to perhaps four or five florists, markets or roadside stands who will buy what he has to offer. A few hints may be acceptable, and they are not ironclad rules. Do not make contacts with too many buyers at first. Otherwise, there may be more of a demand than you can supply. Nothing will discourage a buyer more quickly than to

find that he can get what he wants only on occasion. It must be expected by the grower that there will be certain periods when he will have more flowers than his buyer can handle. If this does not happen, you didn't plant enough gladiolus to meet the demands at the beginning and end of the blooming period. In other words you should not stretch the supply too thin. One reliable buyer who knows where he can find the blooms he needs is worth more than a score of sporadic ones.

If there is one word for the hobbyist, who wishes to sell blooms regularly this way, it is *quality*. The florist can buy junk at give away prices, this he does not need. The hobbyist should not, therefore, try to see how cheaply he can buy his planting stock. He should obtain good stock, and of good cultivars even if it means paying a little more for it. The various shades of pink and salmon are always popular with the florist. They demand white for many occasions such as weddings, and it will be acceptable for use along with other colors at almost any time. If you are in a northern area, weddings are usually past their peak by your peak blooming period. In late Summer, florists are looking for more color, such as red, yellow, blue, lavender and rose. The big advantage that the hobbyist has over the regular cut-flower grower, is being able to venture into the odd shades. Experience will show that once a florist learns to use a variety of color and type, ~e will find that his sales will increase, and so will yours. In time, customers will come to him because they know they can get the unusual. The grower should not try to force these upon the florist, but attempt to get him to try a few at first, possibly as a free bonus. In time, both will benefit. Above all, supply the highest quality flowers obtainable. Don't ruin your market by trying to slip in a few that don't make the grade. If you happen to have a few with crooks or that are too short, place in a separate bucket and provide to a florist complimentary. Usually they can use them and feel you have done them a great service.

Be careful, don't give away too many, just enough to make him *think* he is getting a great deal.

Prices that may be realized in growing for local florist use, will of course, vary with the locality. They will generally be higher in the more urban areas where a few of the home owners have gardens of their own. Nevertheless, in these busy modern times, there are fewer gardeners in the country and small towns. Few people will grow anything that has to be dug or cared for. Some growers prefer to follow the market in prices. A more satisfactory way, perhaps, is to make a contract price for the whole season which will be fair both to the grower and the florist. That will usually mean the grower gets somewhat less than the market price for first class material at the beginning and the end of the season, more at the height. To be assured of a fair price throughout the season is encouraging to the grower, and the buyer will be willing to pay it for the privilege of always receiving top quality gladiolus.

Selling direct to a customer where no florist outlet is available can provide a fair business, and many hobbyists gain income in that way. Many of the above instructions regarding quality and cultivars hold true in the roadside market as well as for florists. For the roadside market, more attention should be paid to the unusual, ruffled and mixed gladiolus. Home buyers are usually not making arrangements, but will be buying for a mixed, colorful bouquet. Mixed bouquets will be the rule rather than the exception. To a certain extent, quality will be second to color. At all events the grower should try to provide his customers with things they cannot obtain readily from other sources. This kind of selling calls for less planning than does the other, and it can be more seasonal. Nevertheless, it also calls for more detail work because handling of a number of small orders takes much more time than a few large ones. Small roadside orders will usually turn into large orders when people discover

there will be flowers available each weekend to purchase for home and church. If you have trouble breaking into the market, try to sell on consignment. The market will have nothing to lose because you take back the unsold product. You will soon discover how many bunches to deliver, but should always deliver enough that some will be left unsold. By checking these bunches that didn't sell, you will soon see what sells best or what was wrong with them that didn't sell. Some are making good extra incomes from selling direct to the consumer. Money so realized can help pay for the new cultivars and for the expenses of visiting gladiolus shows. The florist will always pay for quality and the home impulse buyer will always pay for the unusual that he has neither the time nor space to produce himself.

Many gardeners have managed to sell their excess blooms from roadside stands. If you are on a road with traffic, a stand in your front lawn will work. There are so few people growing glads today that many have never seen the unusual, speckled and variety of colors available. The unusual browns, blues and greens or highly ruffled will awe the buyer at the roadside stands. Many people will be seeing these types for the very first time. Remember, road traffic is the key word. Selling only a few flowers at cut-rate prices is hardly worthwhile. Where a good location is available, the rewards can be considerable. Each grower will work out his own methods for attending the stand, and perhaps only one special bit of advice is necessary; have enough open florets on the spikes to create large splashes of color. Gladiolus cut tight, as they are for the wholesale market, or with only a floret or so open will not attract the passerby. It is color that attracts his attention, and without color even potential show winning gladiolus may go unnoticed. It may be a good idea to have some bunches with only one or two florets open. As your clientele gets more educated, they will prefer these, as they will last longer. Still, the thing to bear in mind is that a successful roadside stand is based on color and lots of it.

Some small towns have farmers' markets. You might consider selling your blooms there. They started a farmers' market in our small town of 17,000 people, a few years ago. I didn't have time to spend at the market, so I talked a lady who sells vegetables into selling my glads on consignment. She was the only person selling flowers, and is now known as the "flower lady." She can't wait for my glads to bloom, as people stop at her booth for first pick of the glads. They just happen to buy her veggies while they are there. It tripled the traffic at her booth. More traffic, more customers, higher sales.

Gladiolus increase so readily through the growing of cormels that the hobbyist may take this means as a way to increase his income. Obviously the growing of cormels offers him a way to have excess planting stock, or corms for sale. Often the buyer of cut flowers will be interested in placing an order for corms as well. In the same way, a florist's customers will frequently ask him the source of the glad blooms he has to offer, so there is a possibility for corm sales here. If this is to be kept a hobby, not too much should be undertaken. It is better to have a limited number of high grade corms for sale, than to try to handle more than can be given proper attention. Don't try to pan off junk. Quality counts and will bring customers back, who might otherwise purchase their corms from the cut rate chains or other similar sources. Try also, to keep a bit ahead of the parade in cultivars. In other words, have some recent introductions to offer. Many people will want these, not having previously known that such even existed. It may cost a little more to get started in the newer and better, but it too, will payoff in the end.

The amateur hybridist who succeeds in producing a superior new cultivar can ordinarily expect to realize something in the way of monetary gain from it. In this field though, chance plays a big part. Something may turn up that is worth introducing, then again it may not. No one can tell the hybridist how to dispose of his new cultivar. However, it should be pointed out that if he is unknown, he may have difficulty in selling the corms if he tries to introduce them himself. It is probably wiser to arrange to have a cataloguer introduce the cultivar. Without this help, the expense of the necessary advertising may be prohibitive. Without advertising, a cultivar may go unsought no matter how inherently good it is. There is some hope of income from the work of hybridizing, but outstanding success is the exception to the rule. Cut flowers and corms offer a more reliable means to the end of making the hobby pay for itself.

The gladiolus offers a hobby that can be made to pay for itself by using anyone of the above-mentioned methods, or by using a combination of them. Ordinarily what the hobbyist gardener does will not interfere with the sales of the commercial growers. What he does is to open new fields more than to cut in on old ones. It seems probable that the hobbyist who extends himself a bit in a commercial way, may at the same time aid the overall gladiolus industry. Selling a wider range of gladiolus, calls the attention of even more people to the beauty of the modern gladiolus.

This possibility of gaining some income is the salvation of the enthusiast who otherwise would not be able to keep up with the new cultivars as he desires. It can be a satisfying experience to the gardener who simply wants to increase his bank account by a reasonable amount, and at the same time have fun doing it. The rewards are there for the one who never forgets two words, *color and quality*.

Updated by Cliff Hartline