

## Turning A Profit With Baby Ginger

Even if you don't live in a climate where ginger is typically grown, it can be a profitable farm crop. William Errickson, Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent for Rutgers Cooperative Extension in Monmouth County, N.J., has found ways for growers to make money off this high-value crop.

"Many growers in our area have an interest in high-value specialty crops that can be produced on small acreage with reduced inputs," says Errickson. "Ginger fits this description, and it also has several health benefits."

Growing ginger in a temperate climate has some challenges. Says Errickson, "Timing is crucial for a successful ginger crop. It grows as a perennial in more tropical climates, but in our regions, we can only produce it as an annual. This means that we need to start it early on heat mats in the greenhouse and give it as long of an extended growing season as possible."

But even so, ginger can be a prolific and profitable producer. At one test site, Errickson's team harvested more than 430 pounds of ginger grown from 30 pounds of seed. Minus the \$300 initial investment in seed, the crop's retail value came to over \$7,000.

Like potatoes, ginger requires hilling two or three times during the growing season. This allows you to pull weeds and top dress the soil. "Ginger is a hungry crop, so fertile soils rich in organic matter will produce the best yields," says Errickson. "A light layer of straw mulch also helps to control weeds while moderating soil moisture and temperature fluctuations."

Due to the shorter growing season, Errickson recommends farmers harvest ginger at an immature stage and sell it within two weeks. "Baby ginger doesn't develop the thick skin that allows fully matured ginger to have a prolonged shelf life," he explains. "However, this also means that you do not have to peel baby ginger before using it, which is a trait many customers find desirable." Farmers can make the short shelf-life work to their advantage by staggering their harvests every few weeks and only digging up what



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they expect to sell at a time.

As with any new crop, Errickson advises that farmers start small and expand their operation slowly. Not only will this help you learn the specifics of growing the crop with less chance of losing a large harvest, but it gives you the chance to develop a market for baby ginger over time. He also emphasizes the importance of starting with disease-free seeds or rhizomes and practicing crop rotation to prevent soil-borne pathogens from affecting the crop.

It's technically possible to save ginger rhizomes from year to year, but the risk of inadvertently spreading disease into your soil is high enough that Errickson recommends against it.

His final advice for a successful ginger crop? Reach out to agriculture experts near you.

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Keith Swenson and his peonies.

## Peony Grower Is World's Largest Breeder

With six international distributors, Minnesota's Swenson Gardens grows peonies for the world (Vol. 37, No. 2). No synthetic fertilizers, insecticides or pesticides are used on their 18,000 peony plants. While that's an important selling point, what really makes the business bloom is its peony hybridization program.

"We're now considered the world's largest hybridizer of new varieties," says Keith Swenson, Swenson Gardens. "Our international business has exploded, with many of our new varieties better known in Europe than in the U.S."

Swenson and his wife, Becky, have around 500 new varieties they are propagating and developing that have yet to be registered. Some of these are a Swenson specialty, hybrids of standard and tree peonies. All new varieties are evaluated over a 3-year period before being released.

By comparison, there are roughly 8,000 peony varieties registered by the American Peony Society. While not all of Swenson's 500 will make the cut, the ones that do can be extremely popular and expensive. New seedlings are priced from \$60 to as much as \$2,500, as was the case with Lembrose, a new variety released in 2021.

"Lembrose sold out within a few hours of release," says Swenson.

One secret to Swenson Garden's prolific introduction program is speed. It commonly takes 10 years or more to develop and prove out a new variety. Swenson has cut that time in half with soil preparation and other technologies, none of which involve root stimulants or chemicals. The program includes composted cow manure from their herd of Dexter cattle.

"Calcium carbonate is key to plant growth," confides Swenson. "Calcium is the building block for all other nutrients. If you

get it at or above normal, it's amazing the production you can get."

Swenson offered a new opportunity for peony lovers this year. Exclusive Seedlings lets a customer buy out the entire stock of a newly released variety. This gives them the right to name the variety.

"We have done this in the past with international distribution of a new variety, but this is new to the U.S. and Canada," says Swenson. "There were only a handful of customers to the program this year, but we expect it to grow. It's an opportunity to name a variety for a mother or grandmother who used to grow peonies."

One buyer this year was a long-term care facility in Canada. "The residents picked out the exclusive seedling they wanted," says Swenson.

No matter how popular the program becomes, it is not likely that Swenson will run out of hybrids. "We have around 3,000 new varieties that have yet to be tested in our selection program," says Swenson.

It's not likely they will run out of plants to sell either. The Swensons planted a few hundred peonies in 2002. This past fall alone, they added 2,500 plants to the thousands already on the farm.

Peony lovers are invited to see Swenson Gardens peonies in full bloom each June. They host 4 days of tours, posting the dates and times on their website and through social media.

"This past year we had more than 4,500 people," says Swenson. "Usually it's in early June, but that can change depending on an early or late spring."

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A combination of unique marketing and varied products help keep the orchard busy.



## 60-Year-Old Family Orchard Business

"At first glance, people can't pronounce our business name," says Shella Czipar, "but once they taste our apples, eat our homemade apple donuts, or have a caramel apple, they never forget it." (It's pronounced zy-pars.)

Shella and her husband, Steve, are 3rd generation owners of Czipar's Orchard just south of Dubuque, Iowa. A family business for 60 years, the Czipars bought the business from Steve's father and mother, Dick and Joan, who ran it for 49 years after buying it from Dick's grandfather and grandmother.

"The 10-acre orchard with 1,500 trees producing 25 varieties of apples and a variety of pears has been a constant, but we always try to add new things to keep people coming back or attract attention for those passing by on the highway," Shella says. Some of the most recent head turners are the likeness of a horse made from oversized pumpkins pulling a two-wheel buggy driven by a scarecrow driver sporting a pumpkin head. There's also an antique lawn tractor pulling a wagon train of carts filled with pumpkins and flowers and a full-size replica of a quarter horse pulling a four-wheeled cart.

"We like to make the shopping experience fun for people of all ages, especially the kids," Shella says. "That's why this year's addition is a giant multi-colored metal dinosaur. People who shop with us tell their friends and that attracts more customers."

Apples and pears that grow in their 10-acre orchard that overlooks the Mississippi River have rich color and flavor. The Czipars use their produce to sell whole apples, pears, cider, preserves, and now their superb caramel apples and apple cider donuts.

"We've had people tell us these are the best-tasting donuts they've ever had, and they've been eating donuts for 50 years," Shella says. "It's a family recipe made using 100 percent apple cider and other ingredients, nothing imitation," Shella adds. "We also produce our own secret-recipe caramel, which, unlike most caramels on the market, doesn't stick to your teeth when you eat it."

Apple pies, turnovers, cashew crunch and other homemade products round out their product offerings, supplemented by locally-produced honey, maple syrup, homemade wines, colorful pumpkins and squash.

Dick and Joan Czipar help with the family business along with Steve and Shella's two children, their spouses and grandkids. Shella says every weekend during late August, September and October is filled with plenty of work and a lot of fun meeting regular customers and new people, "but we wouldn't have it any other way." The last weekend in September, they host an Apple Festival with food, games, craft vendors, and activities for people of all ages which attracts even more attention.

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