"Flowers also offer more frequent harvest opportunities, as many cut-flower crops are harvested weekly, for steady cash flow throughout the season," Dixit says.

University Studies Cut Flowers As An Alternate Crop

The University of Maryland Eastern Shore is researching the financial feasibility of selling flowers as an alternative crop.

"This project started very unexpectedly," says Dr. Naveen Kumar Dixit, extension specialist and associate professor of horticulture. "While purchasing rose bushes online for my home garden, I came across a random advertisement offering a sale on dahlia tubers. Their incredible colors, shapes, and overall beauty caught my attention. Out of curiosity, I ordered more than 50 dahlia varieties for my backyard."

Dahlias, native to Mexico, come in more than 20,000 varieties. The university houses 39 varieties, while Dixit has more than 80 in his own yard.

His interest quickly expanded beyond personal use.

"I found that while the number of dahlia growers in Maryland has been steadily increasing, it's too low to fully tap into the strong local and regional cut-flower market."

A large share of cut flowers sold in the United States is imported from countries such as China and India. Long shipping times force growers to prioritize vase life over other selling points, creating market opportunities for domestic growers to fill these gaps.

"Dahlias, gladiolus and zinnias are ideal examples. They can't handle long shipping times and perform best when grown and sold locally. This makes them excellent candidates for small and medium-sized growers. The short vase life of these flowers, often less than a week, actually creates an opportunity for weekly sales through direct home delivery, subscriptions or local markets."

Dixit's research found strong interest among farmers, particularly those seeking to diversify their operations. He secured two grants to support cut-flower research, outreach and farmer training: a USDA Extension Implementation Program grant and a Northeast SARE Professional Development Program grant.

"These projects focus on training local farmers to grow dahlias commercially, diversify farm income, and attract new consumers to agriculture," says Dixit. "After all, flowers have universal appeal, and dahlias, with their diversity and beauty, are especially hard to resist."

The initial cost of dahlia tubers can be high, but a well-established bed will produce for years. Likewise, the tubers multiply as they spread, providing farmers willing to dig them up with a secondary source of income.

"Flowers also offer more frequent harvest opportunities, as many cut-flower crops are harvested weekly, for steady cash flow throughout the season," Dixit says.

He emphasizes that farmers don't need a large amount of land to get started with cut flowers.

"I always recommend growers identify their potential market and start small. This reduces risk as farmers learn production, harvesting and marketing skills."

Still, growing flowers differs from cultivating traditional crops. Customers value long stems on flowers, but dahlia stems are hollow, making them prone to wind damage. Staking works best for taller varieties, but shorter ones can still be used in garlands and arrangements.

"While all crops require good soil, water and nutrient management, flower production places a much stronger emphasis on appearance, timing and postharvest handling."

Dixit believes the effort is well worth it.

"Because flowers are considered a specialty product, growers can command premium prices, particularly for fresh, locally grown blooms that are harvested and sold within a short time window."

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Oldham shown with some of the cotton shirts they've processed from the cotton they grow.

Cotton Farmers Weave Success

Many cotton growers' balance sheets are "bleeding red" these days, as production costs exceed crop revenue. In the southern U.S., creative cotton growers have found a solution to the cotton cost/price squeeze: further processing cotton into products sold wholesale and directly to consumers. But value-added growers will be the first to admit it's a long road, scattered with obstacles and headaches.

Mark Yeager, a north Alabama cotton grower, first considered further processing when he posted a photo of a cotton bale on Instagram more than 10 years ago. His sister remarked that she'd like some bed sheets made from that cotton. That remark sparked a business idea that's now thriving. In 2024, Yeager's Red Land Cotton business processed 350,000 yards of cotton fabric into heirloom cotton bed sheets and many other cotton products.

For Yeager, a strategic milestone in the company's growth was his 2016 decision to invite his daughter, Anna, to join the company. After college, Anna began her career as an advertising and graphic artist in New York City. Today, with Anna as a partner, the company's growing line of bed linen products is artfully showcased on its website.

Gary Oldham of Samnorwood, Texas, first considered further processing his own cotton in 1994 after learning that an Olympic team was seeking a supplier of organic cotton T-shirts. His family's Texas Panhandle land had produced cotton for more than 100 years, and the farm had been certified organic since 1992. Oldham wasn't prepared to take on the Olympic assignment in 1994, but the idea of producing organic cotton T-shirts had taken root. He began researching how to make his "We Grow T-shirts" vision a reality.

Today, SOS from Texas produces more than 2,000 T-shirts per acre of its cotton-growing land. The company's product line also includes cotton socks, baby clothing and tote bags. Its products are available on its website and through wholesale channels. The majority of its T-shirts are sold plain, but the company also offers several dozen printed designs featuring artwork and catchy slogans.

Despite Yeager's and Oldham's value-added successes, both men doubt that the wide-scale manufacturing of cotton clothing and bedding will ever return to the South at the levels of a century ago. But they're both grateful to be able to provide jobs and strengthen their local communities' economies.

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Zangger Popcorn Hybrids produces up to 30% of the world's hybrid popcorn seed in the heart of Nebraska's popcorn belt.

A Story Of Resilience And Reinvention In Nebraska's Popcorn Fields

In October 1982, popcorn farmer Chuck Zangger's future stood at a crossroads. An early freeze had decimated his harvest, leaving a mess of stalks and worthless kernels.

Frustrated by the situation, Zangger called his seed supplier, Crookham Company, but didn't receive the sympathy he expected.

"If you don't like it, why don't you breed your own popcorn?" the voice said. "You're smart enough, and we'll be right there with you to help. Come on down, and we'll set something up to make this work."

This unexpected prompt planted the seed for a radical idea. If the market wasn't producing hybrids that could thrive in Nebraska, maybe Zangger could.

In the 1980s, Nebraska's popcorn farmers faced uncertainty as they struggled with hybrid corn varieties that failed to perform well in the state's unpredictable weather.

Zangger remembered a long-forgotten jar of hardy Native American flint corn seeds, given to his family more than a decade earlier, and wondered what would happen if he crossed the flint corn with traditional popcorn.

Early crossbreeding attempts produced poor yields, low popping volume, and unusual colors. By 1984, Zangger had developed his first hybrid, aptly named Phoenix for its rise from adversity.

Today, Zangger Popcorn Hybrids is more than an agricultural success story; it's a cornerstone employer in the region. During peak season, the company hires more than 100 people, including dozens of local teenagers who receive progressive wages and scholarship opportunities.

"Getting to where we are now was never easy," Chuck says. "My wife, Carrie, and I built the company from scratch, weathering years of uncertainty and near losses, but we had a passion for farming and a belief in our shared vision. I've always said you never get anywhere in life without people helping you and you helping people, and that's what happened in our family's story."

The Zangger family's resilience spans from handpicking popcorn during harvest to maintaining seed integrity through methods unchanged for decades.

Their commitment to innovation has set their hybrids apart, earning praise from farmers across Asia, Europe and the Americas for their resilience, expansion ratio and consistency.

What began as one man's response to adversity now produces up to 30% of the world's hybrid popcorn seed in the heart of Nebraska's popcorn belt.

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