

The future of organic ornamental plants

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Organic and conventional bedding plant growers in Maine identified their greatest challenges in a recent survey. Credit: Photo by Stephanie Burnett

Whether plants are grown for food or ornamental use, conventional agricultural production methods have the same environmental impact. Pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers can find their way into the air and groundwater, ultimately affecting the environment, wildlife, and communities.

Interest in reducing detrimental environmental impact by using organic production methods is catching on with growers and consumers alike. Increasing numbers of consumers are choosing organic foods for "ethical" reasons; they view organics as having a less harmful impact on the environment than foods grown using conventional production techniques. These eco-conscious consumers are also showing an interest

in purchasing organically grown nonedible crops like ornamental bedding plants and cut flowers. Assuming this green trend continues, organic ornamental bedding plant production may soon be a new niche for conventional bedding plant growers.

A recent USDA report showed that acreage of organic nurseries and greenhouses in the United States has increased 83% since 2004. But supermarket sales of organic [ornamental plants](#) are not keeping up with this growth; organic herbs and flowers have been marketed primarily through the Internet, community-supported agriculture groups, and local farmers markets. Now, some larger ornamental greenhouse growers are starting to integrate organic production into their facilities in anticipation of a growth in consumer demand.

Stephanie Burnett and Lois Berg Stack of the University of Maine and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension surveyed growers in Maine to determine the perceived research needs of this emerging industry. Both organic and conventional greenhouse growers were included in the project to determine what problems organic ornamental bedding plant producers encounter and to find out what barriers prevent conventional bedding plant growers from converting to organic production. The study findings appeared in a recent issue of *HortTechnology*.

Organic growers were asked to identify their greatest motivator to determine whether they felt that there is a real market for organically grown ornamental plants. The greatest percentage (75%) of organic growers indicated that they choose to grow plants organically because "it's the right thing to do." Interestingly, none of the growers who responded said that "market demand" was their greatest motivation for organic ornamental production.

When asked to identify their challenges, organic bedding plant growers

identified insect and disease management as their number one production challenge, and problems with fertility as their second greatest concern. Conventional growers indicated that they primarily avoid organic production techniques because they consider organic fertilization or organic insect management to be too big of a challenge.

According to Burnett, "because both organic and conventional growers consider insect and fertility or substrate management to be challenges facing organic growers, these topics should be top priorities for future research on organic greenhouse production."

More information: The complete study and abstract are available on the ASHS HortTechnology electronic journal web site:
[horttech.ashspublications.org/ ... nt/abstract/19/4/743](http://horttech.ashspublications.org/...nt/abstract/19/4/743)

Source: American Society for Horticultural Science

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