

GROWERS HELPING GROWERS: The ASCFG Grower Grants in 2026

A record application cycle, three exciting awards, and an invitation to apply for 2027.



Steve Crone
ASCFG Executive Director

ONE OF THE THINGS I find most energizing about this organization is what happens when you ask growers to share what they are curious about. This spring, we did exactly that—and the response was remarkable.

The 2026 ASCFG Grower Grant cycle received twelve applications from members across North America. The proposals came from Vermont to Oregon, from Tennessee to Ontario, from the Hudson Valley to the foothills of Colorado. They addressed weed management and water conservation, season extension and soil health, emerging crops and emerging technologies. They were, as a group, truly impressive. The three proposals selected after careful scoring and deliberation by our four-member research committee are highlighted in the sidebar.

I want to use this column to do three things: celebrate the members who were awarded grants this cycle, shine a light on the breadth and ambition of all twelve proposals, and extend an invitation to anyone who has ever had a research idea they didn't know what to do with. The 2027 application window opens this fall—and we want to hear from you.

The Depth of the Pool

What made this cycle exceptional was not just the number of applications—it was what they revealed about where our membership's curiosity is directed. I want to give you a sense of the range, because every one of these ideas deserves to be seen.

Season extension

Several proposals tackled the fundamental challenge of cold-climate growing: how do you get more out of a short season? Ideas ranged from hoophouse forcing trials on a popular early-season perennial to overwintering ranunculus under low tunnels and mulch protection in Zone 5/6 Canada—a topic with appeal to northern growers who have long had to delay planting into spring. Another proposal explored raised-bed systems for tulip production in heavy clay soils, addressing the drainage challenges that limit bulb crops across much of the Midwest and South.

Climate resilience

With weather unpredictability increasingly on every grower's mind, several applicants proposed research directly aimed at adaptation. One Oklahoma grower proposed a fascinating cultivar evaluation to identify dahlias that

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can maintain bloom production, stem quality, and tuber health through the intense heat and drought of the Southern Plains—often a region underrepresented in cut flower research. An Oregon grower, in collaboration with a university farming program, proposed testing whether sunflowers, strawflowers, and cosmos can produce commercially viable stems without summer irrigation. And, a Hudson Valley grower asked whether native perennials interplanted in production fields can improve soil moisture and reduce inputs for adjacent cut flowers—a question at the intersection of ecology and economics.

Sustainability and inputs

The committee was struck by how many applicants were thinking carefully about what they put into the ground and what they take out. One proposal examined hemp stalk fiber as a mulch alternative for moisture retention. Another evaluated ultra-low-volume autofogger technology as a potential improvement over backpack sprayers for pest management in greenhouse and high-tunnel production, with attention to both efficacy and labor savings.

Methods and systems

One of the most methodologically sophisticated proposals in the pool came from a Zone 3b grower in Minnesota, who designed a randomized complete block trial comparing three plant

**Casey Hansen***Phloem Flower Farm, Northern Vermont***Reducing Plastic in Wholesale Cut Flower Production**

Casey will compare three weed management systems—flame weeding, biodegradable mulch, and woven landscape fabric—side by side in standardized beds, tracking labor hours, marketable stem yield, and net return per bed. For cold-climate wholesale growers managing intense weed pressure in a short season, this is exactly the kind of practical, economic data that turns a farm decision into something grounded in evidence rather than habit. Casey brings a doctoral background in environmental studies and a scientist's eye for rigor. We're excited to see what the data shows.

**Maya Kosok***Hillen Homestead, Baltimore, Maryland***Trialing Pre-Chilled Lisianthus for a Robust Fall Crop**

Lisianthus can be a frustrating crop for many growers; the strongest flush tends to arrive in midsummer, when demand is slow and the market is saturated. Maya's project asks whether pre-chilled plugs and adjusted planting timing can shift that production window into fall—when florists want it most. Her trial will run across three planting dates and three farms in the mid-Atlantic, giving the results a breadth that makes this exciting research. Maya is entering her fourteenth season growing flowers and brings both deep practical experience and prior research expertise to the project.

**Elizabeth Simpkins***Riverside Gardens Flower Farm, East Nashville, Tennessee***Testing Fall Matthiola Field Production in Zone 7b**

Stock flowers are beloved by florists, but in warm climates, they're almost exclusively a spring crop. Elizabeth wants to change that. Her trial will plant three heat-tolerant matthiola varieties in August for a targeted October–November harvest, comparing both viability and profitability (pinched sprays versus single stems). If it works, it opens up a premium fall crop for Tennessee growers—including those without high tunnels. Elizabeth's careful variety research and her direct relationships with Nashville florists give this project both good science and a ready market to inform it.

establishment methods—direct sowing, standard plug trays, and the popular “seed snail” method—across four cut flower crops. The experimental design was among the strongest we received, and the research question speaks directly to the decisions new and small-scale growers make every season.

What the Committee Said

Our research committee—experienced growers and educators from across Canada and the U.S.—read every proposal carefully and left detailed notes. A few themes came through consistently in their feedback that I think are worth sharing, because they speak to what makes a strong application.

Replication matters. The single most common piece of feedback across declined proposals was the need for more plants per treatment group. Even modest replication—three plants instead of one—meaningfully improves the confidence we can place in the results. If your trial has only one bed or one plant per treatment, ask yourself what you would conclude if that one plant had an unusual season.

Industry applicability is the top criterion. At 40 of 100 possible points, application to the broader membership carries the most weight in scoring. The committee responds to proposals that can articulate clearly: Who else can use this? What decision will this help growers make? Research that is specific to one farm's conditions but transferable in its conclusions scores well. Research that only works in one place, for one person, is harder to fund.

Budget clarity builds confidence. Several proposals were marked down for budgets that included equipment purchases without cost-sharing, or line items unrelated to the research itself. The committee wants to see that grant funds are being used for the trial, not for durable capital assets the farm will benefit from long after the project ends, unless those costs are shared.

Investigator background matters, but it doesn't require a Ph.D. The committee looks for evidence that you can carry a project through to a publishable report. Prior experience, farm records systems, partnerships with Extension programs or universities, and a clear plan for data collection all build that confidence.

Apply in 2027

The 2027 application cycle will open this fall, with a deadline of February 1, 2027. We have moved the deadline earlier than in past years to give funded projects enough lead time to begin work at the start of the season—an important change for crops like lisianthus that require ordering months in advance.

Grants range from \$500 to \$4,000. A contribution to matching funds is encouraged and rewarded with additional points in the scoring rubric. Half of the award is paid at project start, with the balance paid upon submission of a complete final report for publication in *The Cut Flower Quarterly*.

If you've ever stood in your field and wondered whether something you're doing—or something you're thinking of trying—would work differently, better, cheaper, or more sustainably, that is a research question. Write it down.

The committee actively encourages new researchers and first-time applicants. You do not need a university affiliation or a prior publication record. You need a good question, a workable plan, and the willingness to document what you find and share it with your fellow growers.

This program exists because a specialty cut flower farm relies on practical knowledge—knowledge that is often hard to find in academic literature because our crops, our markets, and our production systems are too specific, too diverse, and too dynamic for most research institutions to keep up with. The people who know what growers need to know are growers. The Grower Grant program is how we fund that knowledge and get it into print.

Applications and guidelines are available at ascfg.org. If you have a question about whether your idea is a good fit, email me at director@ascfg.org. I would love to hear what you're thinking about.

With mission focus,

Steve Crone

ASCFG Executive Director