

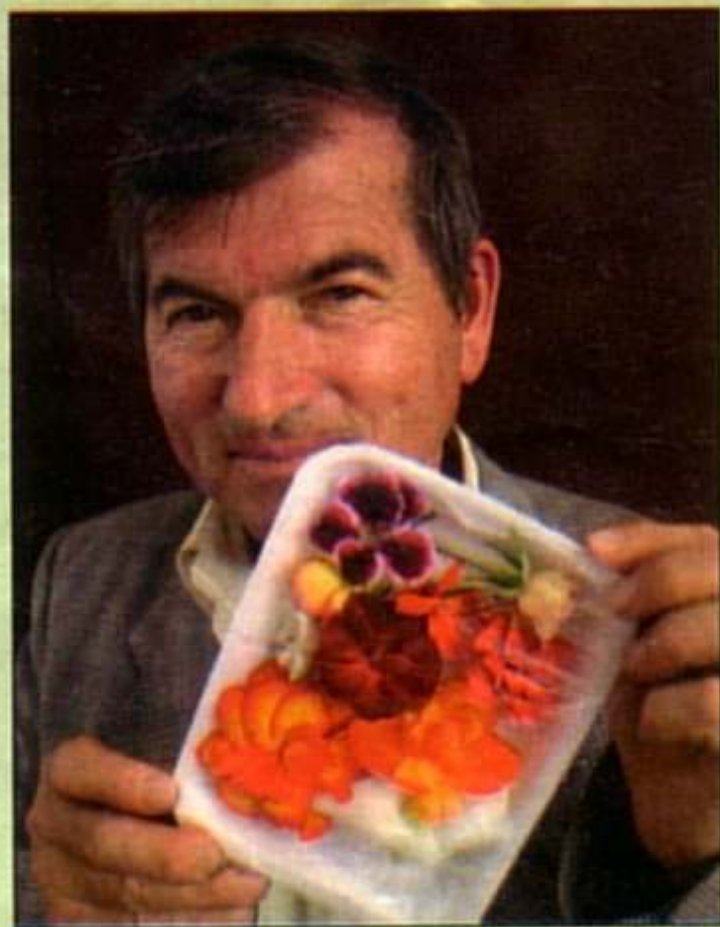
# Flower power

*A local outfit finds fertile – and profitable – soil to grow a business from edible and energy-giving plants*

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As demand for healthy nutrition grows in Hungary, one local entrepreneur sees great potential in specially grown plants, including edible flowers. He is also eyeing the development of so-called energy plants, as crude oil prices continue to soar.

“Edible special plants are of great importance in healthy nutrition, and edible flowers are among them,” says gardening engineer József Pillár, founder and manager of **Speciális Növények Teamje (SNT)**, or Special Plants Team, which focuses its activities on researching and growing new plants without the use of chemicals. SNT functions as a VAT-exempt, independently owned and operated agricultural entity.



**Pillár: rocket scientist**

Edible flowers are currently featured at diplomatic events and elegant private parties, but top-end restaurants and five-star hotels are also among the firm's customers.

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## FLOWERS

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Though specialty edible plants are certainly absent from classic Hungarian gastronomy, these products have become very popular in other European countries with higher levels of “vegetable awareness” – largely because of their proven health benefits, Pillár asserts. As Hungarian customers become more familiar with these products, he believes that demand for specialty plants will grow.

“We would like to see consumption of specialty plants at every level, not just in luxurious restaurants and hotels,” says Pillár.

Some food retailers share this view: SNT is a supplier of rocket (known locally as rucola) for hypermarket chain operator **Tesco Global Stores Rt**, and the piquant salad herb, popular in Italian cuisine, has been introduced at several Tesco stores throughout Hungary. Though rocket is grown by several producers in Hungary, most of the volume sold in the country is still imported from other countries. Pillár adds that rocket helps to prevent aneurysms and demolish saturated fatty acids, which can be found in pork meat – a time-honored staple of Hungarian cuisine.

SNT produces other specialty herbs and greens in Hungary – all of them grown naturally and without the aid of chemicals. One such example, romaine lettuce, is also of crucial importance, as this plant features prominently in Gerson therapy cancer treatments. Specialty greens account for 25% of company revenues.

As for edible flowers, SNT is the only producer in Hungary, according to Pillár. Edible



**Good enough to eat**

PÉTER FODOR

flowers were first widely used in eastern Asia, but are used mainly for decorative purposes in Europe.

Growing edible flowers is difficult work, as only small portions of the plants are edible. And while some species might be poisonous, a subspecies might be edible. The first step is to thoroughly examine whether or not a particular plant is edible, and to ascertain what side-effects might be experienced through consumption. Preparations and examinations are carried out with the help of the drug department of Semmelweis University of Medicine (SOTE) and the dendrology department of Corvinus University.

Once a plant receives a clean bill of health, more pragmatic concerns must be investigated, such as whether cultivation is practi-

cal, or gauging the robustness of the plant. A plant is introduced to the public only after being deemed market-safe and business-friendly.

Pillár's company currently grows around 50 types of edible flowers, and introduces one or two new varieties each month. All the company's products meet HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) requirements.

Edible flowers are currently supplied to, among other clients, Budapest's two Hilton hotels, the Budapest Marriott Hotel, the Kempinski Hotel Corvinus Budapest, the Taverna Hotel Budapest, and hotels close to Lake Balaton, in addition to a number of upmarket restaurants, such as the Trattoria Pomo D'oro, Matteo, Remíz, and Café Miró. Pillár has also entered into talks with representatives of five-star hotels in Vienna, which could significantly boost the volume of edible flowers sold by the company. Currently, edible flowers contribute around a quarter of total company turnover.

Apart from special salad greens and edible flowers, SNT also grows traditional and exotic spices, and is engaged in year-round cultivation of zucchini and cocktail tomatoes. Demand for these products is significant, and is responsible for half the firm's total revenue.

## Homegrown business

Pillár says it was never his intention to get into mass production, but rather to research and develop new plants – including edible flowers, for example.

Formerly working as a gardening engineer and researcher at the Szentes Research Center, he started his own business after the

change of political regime in 1989, making an initial investment of Ft 3 million–Ft 4 million (€12,300–€16,400) to acquire a small agricultural plot with walk-in plastic tunnels. The company now employs eight persons, including Pillár's wife, daughter and son, who are also interested in all things horticultural.

Typically, once a product was developed and distributed among farmers for mass production, Pillár maintained his own limited production facility to produce specialty plants. Income grew along a linear path for the first decade of operation, but has stagnated somewhat in recent years due to ever-increasing competition from Europe's agricultural producers.

To keep his enterprise solvent – apart from selling edible flowers on foreign markets and distributing specialty greens to hypermarket chains – Pillár is also turning his green thumb to developing “energy plants.”

These plants, and the materials extracted from them, are suitable for preparing oil-based fuels and lubricants, and solid fuel, says Pillár. Energy plants can also serve as raw material for the production of plastics, he adds.

As crude oil prices continue to soar to record levels, natural innovations like these are becoming more and more important. The development of these plants started in the United States during the 1960s, and thorough research has also been carried out in Hungary. Pillár maintains that experiments were carried out at the production level, and that the processes are detailed and recorded.

According to Pillár, the introduction of such plants could change ratios and structures of plant cultivation – and might possibly lead to huge profits for producers.