



# Hibbs Brief

*Hibbs Institute for Business & Economic Research*

## **Rooted in Roses: The Blossoming Legacy of Tyler's Floral Economy**

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In this edition of the **Hibbs Brief**, we examine how the floriculture industry has helped shape Tyler's cultural identity, historical legacy and economic development. From its iconic roses to the businesses and events they inspire, floriculture remains deeply rooted in the city's growth story.

Long before Tyler gained recognition for its healthcare and educational institutions, it was known for something more colorful — roses. The city earned the title "Rose Capital of America" not just for its stunning landscape, but because roses played a central role in its economy and daily life.

### **A City Grown from Roses**

The origins of Tyler's rose legacy are rooted in a rich history of rose cultivation that began in the late 19th century. The first recorded sale of rose plants in the region occurred in 1879. By 1917, entire train carloads of rose bushes were being shipped out of East Texas. The industry flourished in the decades that followed, reaching its peak in the post-World War II era. By the late 1950s, rose growers in East Texas produced about two-thirds of garden rose bushes used commercially in the United States every year. More than 30 million plants were cultivated and harvested annually by nearly 300 growers within a 50-mile radius of Tyler, fueling local employment. Every fall, millions of rose bushes were shipped from Smith County to 48 states in the nation and 25 countries, firmly establishing roses as both an economic engine and a symbol of regional pride.<sup>1, 2</sup>

Tyler's climate, sandy loam soil and consistent rainfall once gave it a competitive edge over producers in drier states like California, Oregon and Arizona. However, by the 1970s, advancements in irrigation and climate-control technologies allowed growers in those regions to overcome their environmental limitations. At the same

time, Tyler's increased rainfall began contributing to fungal diseases, making rose cultivation more difficult. In response, many local producers adapted. While some continued growing roses, others transitioned into logistics and rose-handling operations. East Texas businesses began forming partnerships with growers on the West Coast, receiving bare-root rose plants for packaging and national distribution. Over time, the heart of Tyler's rose industry shifted from large-scale cultivation to processing and supply chain coordination. Despite the decline in local growing, Tyler maintained its prominence as a national hub for the rose trade and preserved its deep cultural ties to the floral industry.<sup>3</sup>

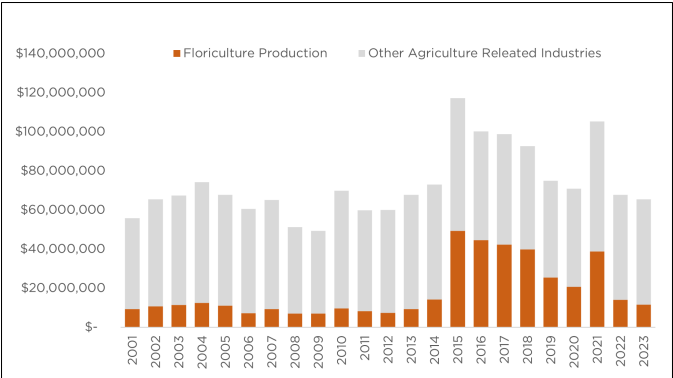
### **The Economic Roots of Tyler's Rose Industry**

Roses have long symbolized Tyler's cultural heritage, but they also represent a significant chapter in the region's economic history. For decades, floriculture — encompassing the cultivation and sale of ornamental plants such as cut flowers, potted plants, bedding varieties and decorative foliage — has been one of the most active sectors in Tyler's agricultural landscape. While the industry has evolved, it continues to play an important role in the local economy.

**Figure 1** shows the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) generated by floriculture compared to other agriculture-related industries in the Tyler Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) from 2001 to 2023. In 2001, floriculture generated \$9.3 million, representing 20% of total agricultural output in the Tyler MSA. The sector experienced steady growth, reaching \$14.3 million by 2014. From 2015 through 2018, floriculture became the dominant contributor to the region's agricultural economy, accounting for more than 70% of total agricultural GDP and peaking at \$49.3 million in 2015.

This surge was likely driven by growing consumer demand for ornamental plants and increased local investment in packaging and distribution infrastructure. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, floriculture sales in Tyler rose from \$4.5 million in 2012 to more than \$10.5 million by 2017, mirroring national trends in home gardening and landscape spending. However, by 2022, sales had declined to \$7.9 million.<sup>4</sup> Rising input costs, labor shortages and shifting preferences toward drought-tolerant landscaping may explain the downturn. By 2023, floriculture’s share of agricultural GDP in the Tyler MSA had dropped to 22%, with output totaling \$11.6 million.

**Figure 1. Floriculture Production Output and Other Agriculture-Related Industries in the Tyler MSA (2001-2023)**

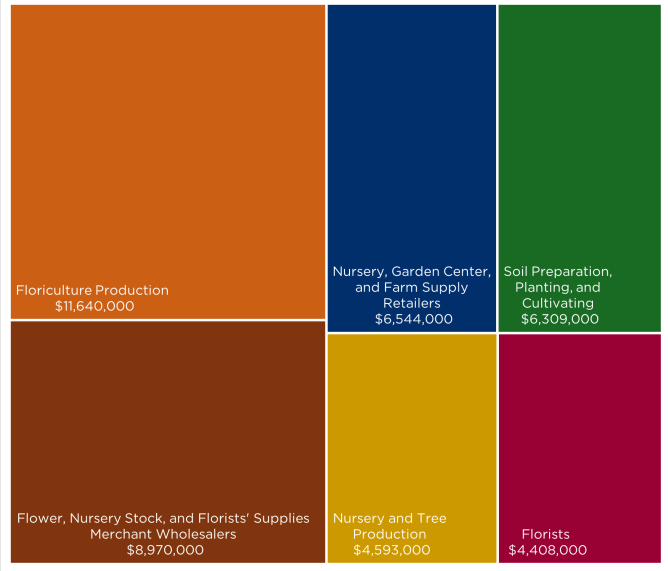


Source: Hibbs Institute for Business and Economic Research using JobsEq data.

**Figure 2** provides a detailed breakdown of Tyler’s floriculture economy by industry segment. Leading the sector is floriculture production, generating \$11.6 million, followed by wholesale distributors at \$8.97 million, garden centers at \$6.54 million and soil preparation services at \$6.31 million. Florists and nursery producers contribute an additional \$4.4 million and \$4.6 million, respectively.

While the combined GDP for these industries declined by approximately 6% between 2001 and 2023, the sector has proved resilient. Instead of depending solely on large-scale cultivation, the local floriculture economy has diversified to include a broader ecosystem of businesses — from retail outlets and distribution networks to specialized service providers. This shift suggests that Tyler’s rose industry remains vibrant, with its economic roots branching out in new complementary directions.

**Figure 2. GDP Contribution by Floriculture-Related Industries in the Tyler MSA (2023)**



Source: Hibbs Institute for Business and Economic Research using JobsEq data.

**Roses in the Cultural Identity of Tyler**

In Tyler, roses are more than a crop — they represent a deep sense of pride, tradition and community identity. Since 1933, the Texas Rose Festival has celebrated the city’s floral heritage, attracting visitors from across the nation.<sup>5</sup> The annual event highlights the beauty of roses while celebrating the city’s heritage through parades; historical exhibits; and the formal presentation of the Rose Queen, Princess, Duchess of the Rose Growers, Ladies-in-Waiting and Duchesses representing communities near and far.

The 2023 festival demonstrated the powerful connection between culture and economics. Ticket sales from major events generated more than \$500,000. The coronation ceremonies drew approximately 4,400 attendees while nearly 1,300 guests participated in the Ladies’ and Men’s Luncheons. More than 4,600 reserved seats were sold for the Rose Parade, with thousands more lining the streets to enjoy the celebration.<sup>6</sup>

Complementing the annual festival is the Tyler Municipal Rose Garden, established in 1952. Home to more than 35,000 rose bushes and 500 varieties, it stands as the largest rose garden in the United States and remains one of Tyler’s most visited attractions.<sup>7</sup>

Together, these enduring traditions reflect and reinforce the city's unique identity. Each October, the community gathers not only to celebrate its past, but to celebrate the continuing significance of roses in shaping local culture and economic life.

This information was also featured in the August/September issue of TYLER TODAY Magazine. Visit [bluetoad.com/publication/?i=850103&p=116&view=issueViewer](https://bluetoad.com/publication/?i=850103&p=116&view=issueViewer) to read the article for free.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pemberton, H.B. (1992). "The Texas Rose Industry," Combined Proceedings, International Plant Propagators' Society 42 (1992). <https://www.pubhort.org/ipps/42/96.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Information extracted from archived documents in the Tyler Rose Museum. \*The pictures were obtained from the Texas Archive repository: "Story of the Rose Industry at the Tyler Rose Museum." [https://texasarchive.org/2010\\_00953](https://texasarchive.org/2010_00953)

<sup>3</sup> Information obtained via a short conversation with Mr. Paul Breedlove, third generation of local rose growers at Breedlove Nursery & Landscape.

<sup>4</sup> USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), 2022 Census of Agriculture, County-Level Data for Smith County, Texas. <https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/>

<sup>5</sup> The Rose Festival was canceled in 2020 as a precautionary measure to avoid the spread of the novel coronavirus during COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>6</sup> Estimates by the Hibbs Institute based on the Texas Rose Festival Association's 2024 IRS Form 990 and ticket pricing information from the 92nd Annual Texas Rose Festival brochure.

<sup>7</sup> Information extracted from the Visit Tyler Department website. \*Photos obtained from archived documents in the Rose Museum and the Visit Tyler Department website. <https://www.visitt Tyler.com/tyler-municipal-rose-garden/>

The Hibbs Institute has created a [LinkedIn](#) page that frequently releases business and economic information. Follow our page for future brief updates, announcements and links to **our periodic publications**.

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