

# *American Beauty*

*The renaissance of local,  
seasonal, and sustainable flowers*

By Debra Prinzing

The Slow Flowers Movement helps connect consumers with flowers. It also gives voice to flower farmers, shining a light on their crops, practices, and stories. And it supports innovative florists, shops, and studios who (like those progressive chefs) believe that local sourcing is a core principle of their company values.

The Slow Flowers Movement is rooted in a single question: “Do you know where your flowers come from?” Unfortunately, most people do not. When the California Cut Flower Commission surveyed U.S. consumers, 74 percent answered “no” to this query. To a follow-up question that asked “If you were given a choice to buy American-grown flowers, would you?” a majority of respondents—58 percent – said “yes.”

So the issue isn’t whether consumers want their flowers to come from nearby farms and their purchases to benefit local farm economies. Rather, it’s an issue of transparency, choice, and access.

My interest in the revival of domestic cut flowers has taken me across the country to meet growers raising beautiful crops on small and large farms from Alaska to Florida, from the Southwest to New England. Many of the stories I gathered have appeared in magazines and newspapers, and finally in a book aptly called *The 50 Mile Bouquet* (St. Lynn’s Press, 2012), which documented pioneering flower farmers, progressive floral designers, and inspired DIY flower lovers.

Then, I spent one full year creating a floral arrangement every week, using only what my garden provided or what I procured from local flower farms in my region, the Pacific Northwest. I called that book *Slow Flowers*. Like its predecessor’s nod to the *One-Hundred Mile Diet*, *Slow Flowers* takes inspiration from the Slow Food Movement. That’s fitting because our present-day consciousness about flowers is similar to where farm-to-table awareness was a few decades ago. Flowers, or shall I say “floral consumers,” have a lot of catching up to do!

I have told the stories of floral entrepreneurs who, like food farmers and rock star chefs, elevate heirloom plant varieties and design with



Zinnia flowers are very easy to grow and bloom heavily. They are truly a work horse in the garden that keeps on giving. They are full of color and attract butterflies.



uncommon floral ingredients. Readers, audiences, and the media often ask “Where can I find local flowers and the farmers and florists who provide them?”

The question is necessary because so few flowers are labeled the way every single piece of a grocery store’s produce is: it bears a sticker identifying its origin. Perhaps because we don’t eat flowers, we have taken them for granted. We’ve forgotten that flowers are part of agriculture, and we’re unaware of the art and science of flower farming. *The Andean Trade Preference Act*, a 1991 U.S. trade action, effectively opened our marketplace to low- or no-tariff flowers from several South American countries. When that happened, no one spoke up, or they didn’t speak loudly enough to even ask for federal offsets as other agricultural crops have received when threatened by imports.

Twenty-five years of gradual erosion has taken its toll on American flowers. My friend Christina Stembel of Farmgirl Flowers, a San Francisco-based e-commerce business that sources primarily California-grown flowers and greens, analyzed USDA floral statistics. She determined that 58 percent of U.S. flower farms have gone out of business since 1992. Most farm closures are probably connected to this current state of affairs: only twenty percent of cut flowers sold in the U.S. are American-grown. Eighty percent are imported.

---

## HONEST FLOWERS

After saying “someone should create a directory of florists who source locally and flower farms that sell direct to consumers,” I finally determined that I had to be that person. I launched [slowflowers.com](http://slowflowers.com) in 2014, after a year of site development and a successful Indiegogo crowd-funding campaign. Think of [slowflowers.com](http://slowflowers.com) like Epicurious, for honest flowers. Type in the city, state, zip code, type of flower or event, and the search will suggest floral businesses you can patronize. You may be looking for flowers to decorate a wedding or dinner party, to give as a get-well gift, or even to give to yourself. [Slowflowers.com](http://slowflowers.com) members take a pledge to be transparent about the flowers they sell.

Currently, there are 700 members on the site, representing 48 states and 2 Canadian provinces (we added Canada in 2016 at the urging of our North American flower farming neighbors because they are under the same import pressures as U.S. flower farmers are). The Slow Flowers Movement helps connect consumers with flowers. It also gives voice to flower farmers, shining a light on their crops, practices, and stories. And it supports innovative florists, shops, and studios who (like those progressive chefs) believe that local sourcing is a core principle of their company values.

Time and again, I hear how excited people are to buy local flowers. They know that those purchases benefit farm families, create jobs, keep their dollars in the community, and preserve agricultural land. There is a better way to beautiful, and you are invited to join me on the journey.

---

## NEXT GENERATION FLOWER FARMING

In the most recent USDA floriculture census, dated 2012, approximately 5,900 respondents identified themselves as raising cut flowers and greens on some or all of their land. After declines in the number of U.S. flower farms in the past two decades, we witnessed the uptick of 16 percent (up from about 5,000 farms identifying flowers as some or all of their crop mix in 2007). This is an encouraging shift, suggesting more farms are again planting and harvesting cut flowers, although it’s hard to know what percentage of these are new to farming versus existing food farms diversifying into flower crops. There is one hint that it may be a bit of both. In 2007, the USDA published a study of the most profitable crops for small agriculture farms. The agency found that floriculture is the most lucrative crop for farms producing between \$10,000 and \$500,000 in annual sales (after a half million in revenue, hog and pig farming move to the top of the list).

---

## WHO ARE TODAY’S FLOWER FARMERS?

### **Butternut Gardens**

Southport, Connecticut

Evelyn Flora Lee, Owner

Year Started: 2011

Total Acreage: Approximately 1 acre.

“I truly have a small, suburban farm,” Evelyn says. “I dug up the back and front yard of my home, which is 1.4 acres. Then I added a second site, which is a total of 1.3 acres. It must have been some fifteen or so years ago that I saw an article about flower farming in an airline magazine. Front and center was a lovely photograph of a local flower farmer emerging from a field with armloads of flowers. It gracefully portrayed the extensive planning, hard work, sweat, and aching joints that I now know went into their harvest. It was magical! The mental picture remained with me for years as my children grew and prepared to leave the nest and as I pursued environmental jobs and parenting. It would not have been as impactful, of course, had I not been a lifelong gardener and environmentalist. I likely would have thought, “Oh, that’s nice,” and then would have gone on with my life without a second thought. It would not have been as impactful had I not cut garden and field flowers as a child or had the luxury of fashioning



“Being able to turn my life-long passion for gardening into “the little flower farm that could” has proven most rewarding. I am proud to bring agriculture back

to Southport and to share the unsurpassed beauty and fragrance of local flowers with my community. I am also proud to be a part of the rapidly growing Slow Flowers movement and to be an Accredited Organic Land Care Professional who wants to guide others to care for their suburban landscapes in a way that leaves a positive legacy.”

*- Evelyn Flora Lee, Butternut Gardens*



Organic farming yields beautiful dahlias at Butternut Gardens in Southport, Connecticut. Above: Peonies are among Evelyn Lee’s most prolific and popular crops

“My interest in the revival of domestic cut flowers has taken me across the country to meet growers raising beautiful crops on small and large farms from Alaska to Florida, from the Southwest to New England.”

*- Debra Prinzing*



CSA bouquets and custom wedding flowers are part of Butternut Gardens' diversified income sources.

wonderfully beautiful and fragrant flower crowns and necklaces with some of these homegrown, freshly cut flowers. With this mental picture following me around for a while and a lifetime of making mud pies, digging in the dirt, and traipsing through field, forest, and garden, it was only a matter of time before I began researching cut flowers. Then very diligently I dug up my lawn with an eye toward creating a suburban flower farm. As peculiar as it is to be known as “the flower lady,” I can’t imagine doing anything else.

**Crop Mix:** Extensive mix of annuals, perennials, bulbs, greens, and ornamental shrubs, allowing for a beautiful combination of more than 500 varieties of focal flowers, fillers, and foliage. The home lot is focused on perennials, spring bulbs, hardy annuals, anemones, and late-blooming chrysanthemums. The second growing space contains pussy willow, summer annuals, peonies, and dahlias.

**Best sellers:** “Peonies and dahlias always fly out of the gardens, but customers love the changing nature of our blooms throughout the season, whether in mixed bouquets or straight bunches. The elements of change, surprise, newness, and freshness are the real charm of farm-grown flowers from Butternut Gardens. “What I grow is different – even if we have some of the same varieties one finds at a wholesaler or flower shop,” Evelyn says.

**Outlets:** Evelyn has sold through many channels, including farmers’ markets, wholesale to florists in the Brooklyn area, flower CSAs, weddings/events, and small grocery chains. “Because I am an owner/operator who literally does it all, I am reducing outlets to maintain sanity and focus as well as to optimize my necessary farming time,” she explains. “In 2017, I will open a long-awaited ‘honor system’ sales cottage with a floral cooler right here at Butternut Gardens. I will continue the weekly CSA, wholesale to a few local grocery stores, and provide bulk flowers and some professionally designed pieces for a limited number of weddings or events. I also plan to increase my onsite workshop and lecture offerings.”

**Growing Practices:** Butternut Gardens is a Certified Bee Friendly Farm, owing to Evelyn’s non-use of harmful insecticides, provision of water, nesting habitat, and plants for pollen, nectar, egg habitat, and larval food. “I want to be a good neighbor and set an example for suburban land management, which, perhaps strays from the highly manicured look common in suburbia, but is respectful of the soil, wildlife, native vegetation, water resources, and my neighbors,” she says. The farm is organized with 4-foot-wide planting rows separated by 30-inch grass pathways (ideal for wheelbarrow traffic), which are full of clover, dandelions, violets, speedwell, and other pollinator-friendly “weeds.”

Evelyn’s priority is soil health; she uses no synthetic chemicals on her plants. “Even OMRI-approved products are rarely used since most are not specific to one pest or another. I accept that I might lose a crop when I do not spray, but I wish to develop as diverse a natural ecosystem as possible and not harm the beneficials.” Planting and digging is done by hand; flower rows are mulched by pine bark chips, straw, pine needles, chopped leaves, landscape fabric or paper. “I am an almost completely no-till farm, and I am continuing to try new methods to cover and smother unwanted weedy vegetation and then plant within the dead matter, allowing the nitrogen and carbon to recycle in place.”

### 3 Porch Farm

Comer, Georgia

Steve and Mandy O'Shea, Owners

Year Started: 2012

Total Acreage: 3.5 acres

"Mandy and I were drawn to flower farming for a variety of reasons. From literally day two of our relationship, we started planning a way to take our mutual love for nature and a hands-on approach to life, with her passion for growing and my passion for sustainability, and to come up with the most positive and fulfilling life and livelihood that utilized all those ingredients," Steve says. "A hyper-sustainable organic farm rose to the surface quite early, and the flower part came a little later. Our first farm year was largely veggie- and fruit-focused, but we grew a few flowers on the side. As time passed, we found we were drawn more to flowers. Though our market had virtually zero demand for local flowers, we took a gamble and dove in headlong, effectively creating a market where there didn't seem to be one before. "Mandy also had prior design experience utilizing foraged and homegrown blooms and was constantly inspired by the amazing variety of botanical species on our property that lend themselves quite beautifully and uniquely to the wild aesthetic of her design work. Flowers quickly became our universe and remain so."

"Virtually all of our farm planning and appreciation takes place on a porch. We can overlook the expanse of the farm, watch the animals forage, hunt, and play and be inspired enough to step off again and get back to work."

- Steve O'Shea, Farmer, 3 Porch Farm

**Crop Mix:** 3 Porch Farm devotes approximately 2.5 acres to cut flowers and 1 acre to fruit/orchard. Flower varieties include ranunculus, anemones, tulips, daffodils, peonies, zinnias, cosmos, rudbeckia, celosia, lisianthus, dahlias, chrysanthemums, amaranth, and many more varieties. Fruit crops include hardy and delicious apples, plums, pears, peaches, kiwis, nectarines, strawberries, and blueberries.

**Best Sellers:** Cut flowers and HoneyPops, a frozen fruit pop made using 3 Porch Farm's fruit, plus locally-produced honey.

**Outlets:** 3 Porch Farm primarily sells flowers through farmers' markets, including Saturdays from April through December at the Athens Farmers' Market at Bishop Park and Saturdays from March through December at the Freedom Farmers' Market in Atlanta at the Carter Center. The farm also caters to local florists and designers and occasionally supplies an Atlanta-based wholesale florist.

**Growing Practices:** The farm is Certified Naturally Grown. "This means we use the same principles as organic farming; however, the paperwork is not as intense," Steve explains. The farm is completely solar powered; farm vehicles run off of waste vegetable oil recycled from restaurants in Athens.



Above: Mandy and Steve O'Shea of 3 Porch Farm, based in Comer, Georgia; Below: Lisianthus is one of the floral varieties used by the farm's sister business, Moonflower Design, a full-service custom floral studio serving weddings.



## Spring Forth Farm

Location: Hurdle Mills, North Carolina

Owners: Megan and Jonathan Leiss

Year Started: 2014

Total Acreage: Approximately .5 acres for annual flowers with additional areas devoted to perennials.

Megan and Jonathan started growing flowers commercially when they set out to create a homestead to provide food and a meaningful, simple life for their family. To support this endeavor, they started Spring Forth Farm as a homestead business. In addition to their flowers, Jonathan and Megan grow nearly all of their yearly supply of vegetables and donate crates of fresh produce to a local food pantry every two weeks.

Crop Mix: "We especially love the spring flowers such as peonies, Queen Anne's lace, bupleurum, larkspur, campanula, and dianthus," Jonathan says. "In summer and fall we grow sunflowers, celosia, dahlias, and hydrangea. In the winter, we offer curly willow and pussy willow. We plan to move away from growing in the summer and instead offer winter flowers such as anemone, ranunculus, poppies, and sweet peas.

Best Sellers: Mini sunflowers with a 3- to 4-inch flower head sell the best. DIY flower buckets and Spring Forth Farm's bouquet subscriptions are the highest grossing items on the farm.

Outlets: Florists, especially retail florists, are the farm's largest/best clients. Other channels include DIY flowers for weddings and bouquet subscriptions.

Growing Practices: Spring Forth Farm uses sustainable, no-till farming techniques to grow fresh, seasonal flowers without the use of synthetic chemicals or fertilizers. These farming practices support an incredible biodiversity on the farm, which was in tobacco monoculture for a hundred years when Megan and Jonathan bought the land. Now dozens of pollinating and beneficial predatory insects, various amphibians and small mammals, hummingbirds, and songbirds visit the flowers and wild habitats on the farm. Flowers are grown in permanent raised beds; no mechanical cultivation is employed. The couple uses hand tools such as the Meadow Creature broad fork, plants cover crops, and relies on "occultation," a practice of covering the beds with tarps for 6 to 8 weeks to stimulate soil life, suppress weeds, and build soil health. 🌸

---

Above, top row: Megan and Jonathan Leiss of Spring Forth Farm in Hurdle Mills, North Carolina; Armloads of just-picked peonies; Bottom row: Germinating seeds; harvesting gooseneck loosestrife (*Lysimachia clethroides*); preparing soil blocks for seed starting.