



# Bright Futures

BY KATIE HENDRICK VINCENT  
AND JULIE PHILLIPS RANGLES

The floral industry depends on a strong next generation. Here are some people and programs to watch.



The challenges of building the floral industry's next gen workforce are real: With unemployment low, competition is steep. Educational programs, including design schools, are nowhere near as plentiful as they've been in the past. Other "sexier" industries, which often require fewer hours and less physical labor, are pulling prospects away.

And yet ... As older generations retire or pull back from their roles, the floral industry needs young workers. Millennials (those aged 21 to 36 in 2017) now make up 35 percent of the U.S. labor force, the largest of any demographic, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data. As of 2017, 56 million Millennials were working or looking for work. That's a lot of people — carrying a lot of new ideas and energy.

So, how can the industry attract these motivated younger workers, mentor them and help them find career paths that are challenging, rewarding and long lasting? This month, we went straight to some ambitious, hard-working up-and-comers, some still in school, some starting their careers, to find out what drew them to the world of flowers and plants — and what might keep them here.



## GO DEEPER

Read about a high school that's helping students of all abilities learn about flowers through classes and an on-campus shop. Plus check out SAF's research on the benefits of flowers and plants at [safnow.org/moreonline](https://safnow.org/moreonline).

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At 16, Klair McDermott, AIFD, PFCI, wanted an after-school job and turned to the Stop & Shop down the road from her Middletown, Connecticut home. She was assigned to the floral department, which set in motion a lifelong career. When she enrolled at the University of Connecticut a few years later, she majored in horticulture because of her prior experience with flowers. She complemented her coursework with hands-on training at the New York Botanical Garden, where she took design classes on the weekends.

Upon graduating in 2007, McDermott received a Mosmiller scholarship from the American Floral Endowment, which she used for a summer apprenticeship with Renae Brubaker of Renae's Bouquet in Santa Ynez, California. There, she learned how a retail flower shop operates, advanced her design techniques and picked up West Coast trends.

When the summer ended, McDermott returned to Connecticut, working at Guildford White House Florist while she got her affairs in order to purchase her own shop. In June 2008, she opened Klair's Seaflowers Florist in Essex, Connecticut, a quaint town near Long Island Sound. (That's right, 2008 — the year the economy turned.) She hobbled through the Great Recession and finally sold the shop in January 2010.

"The day I closed, I already had my bags packed," she said.

Her next stop: New York City.

In the Big Apple, McDermott immersed herself in the events industry, working with Floralia Decorators, the in-house floral design company for the Waldorf Astoria, followed by Jes Gordon's Proper Fun before freelancing for several different businesses. The experience acquainted her with a slew of floral industry professionals, NYC venues, design and collaboration styles — "and personalities," she said with a laugh. It was exciting work, but also very tiring.

"I felt like I was aging very quickly," she recalled. "I started thinking about other opportunities in the industry."

Active on LinkedIn, McDermott attracted the attention of a friend of a friend who was hiring for Sunshine Bouquet, a company that grows, designs and supplies flowers for the mass market.

"I wasn't sure if the pitch was real or not, but I agreed to a phone call," she said. In short order, she moved to Miami, Florida, Sunshine's headquarters. "It was a whirlwind first month, just weeks before Mother's Day 2012," she said.

On her third day, McDermott boarded a plane for Colombia to tour Sunshine Bouquet's farms. Then she was off to New Jersey, to see where the company's European and domestic product is consolidated. After that, she made numerous trips to retailers to see how they merchandised Sunshine bouquets and arrangements.

"This business has so many moving parts," she said. "I was intrigued from day one and have been every day since."

**Goals:** "I'm a big believer in education," said McDermott, who was inducted into the American Institute of Floral Designers this summer and will formally join the ranks of SAF's Professional Floral Communicators-International during SAF Palm Springs 2018. "There's always something new to learn and experience."

—K.H.V.

On a whim, Summer Blanco signed up to hear a horticulture professor speak during her high school's career day.

"She was so passionate talking about all the cool things she's done, including her tenure at Disneyland," Blanco recalled. "After that, I put horticulture down as my desired college major and looked for ways to get involved right away."

The summer before starting college, Blanco volunteered at Rancho Santa Anna Botanic Garden in Clermont, California, where she learned propagation techniques and how to prepare plants for the garden's retail nursery. She admired the staff's dedication and enthusiasm, which she found contagious.

"They were humble, kind people who were willing to show me the ropes," she said. "Other kids were out and about before heading off to college, but I was just planting — and I couldn't have been happier."

In the classroom at Cal Poly, Blanco found more people crazy about plants and flowers. Professors and older students steered her toward new opportunities, both academic and in the field. During her sophomore year, she worked as a cashier at Flowers by Robert Taylor in West Covina, California, picking up basic design skills and taking field trips to the Los Angeles Flower Market.

"That's when I got very into floriculture," she said. "I'm pretty sure every day of that job I said something along the lines of, 'Oh my gosh! What is this? This is beautiful!'"

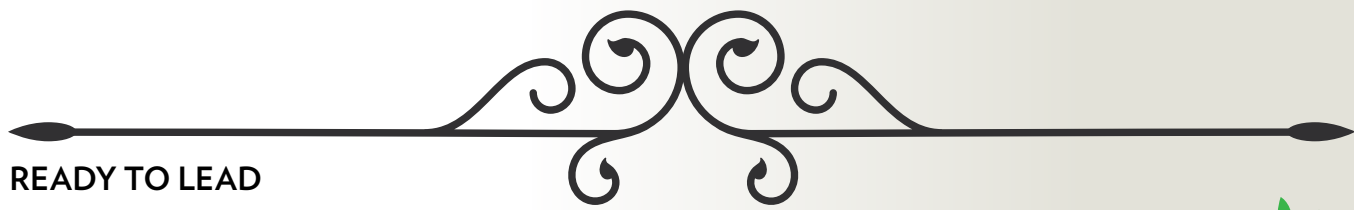
The experience spurred her to concentrate her studies in botany. Her boss, sensing her curiosity and drive, told Blanco about the American Floral Endowment and its scholarship opportunities for students. The 2017 recipient of the American Florists' Exchange Scholarship, Blanco spent the past summer at Harvard University, collaborating on a research study about pollen manipulation and flower evolution.

**Goals:** Blanco plans to pursue a Ph.D. "I'm particularly interested in studying floral scent," she said. "It has a huge impact on consumer preference and understanding it better could benefit the industry."

*The 20*  
**Researcher**  
**Summer Blanco**  
California State Polytechnic University  
Pomona, California



— K.H.V.



## READY TO LEAD

Once young workers enter the industry, how can you ensure they have the tools to grow? This month at **SAF Palm Springs**, outside experts and floral industry members will share tips on developing this next generation. Can't make it to California? Look for coverage in future SAF publications. Another great resource for young industry members? Join the **SAF Next-Gen Floral Pros Facebook group**. There, you'll find other young professionals from all segments sharing ideas. To join, email SAF's Max Duchaine, [mduchaine@safnow.org](mailto:mduchaine@safnow.org).

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# The Plant Evangelists

**The Collegiate Plant Initiative**  
 University of Florida, Texas A&M University,  
 Pennsylvania State University

On Friday, Oct. 13, 2017, students at the University of Florida encountered some incredibly *good* luck. A new student organization, the Collegiate Plant Initiative (CPI), had lined Turlington Plaza, a busy campus corridor, with potted coleus plants — 1,000 of them to be exact — and offered them free to a good home. Delighted students swarmed the swag, snatching up everything in less than six minutes.

The giveaways, known as “plant drops,” occur every few months and serve as viral marketing campaigns for the organization, which aims to generate appreciation for plants, discover which plants in particular people love and encourage students to consider a career in horticulture, explained rising senior Virginia Frazier, CPI’s executive director.

“It’s a mad rush,” Frazier said of the plant drops. “Each one seems to draw a bigger and bigger crowd.”

A group of about 20 students, representing a range of academic backgrounds — from public relations to engineering — connected last year after taking “Plants, Gardening and You” (PGY), a popular 1-credit course taught by David Clark, Ph.D. The students discussed their mutual affection for plants, which — as SAF research has proven — can help reduce stress, increase productivity and improve moods. They also talked about what they could do to spread the plant love to their peers. This led to the formation of CPI in the summer of 2017.

Clark helped the students find supporters, both through the university and industry organizations. The American Floral Endowment sponsored the group, which became a national nonprofit in January and has since spread to Texas A&M University and Pennsylvania State University, providing educational grants and helping to source product for plant drops. The University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences funds CPI’s research studies. Currently, the group is analyzing plant preference by gender, age and academic background by showing the roughly 400 students in Clark’s PGY class five bedding plants and asking them to pick their favorite.

“We’re going to develop a predictive model to name the demographic that will like which plant,” Frazier said.

Additionally, CPI maintains a robust list of horticultural leaders offering volunteer positions, internships and part- and full-time jobs.

“We understand that the industry has a deep supply chain,” Frazier said. “And we believe that, regardless of their major, students can find a fulfilling career in this field.”

**Partners:** Altman Plants, a wholesale nursery in Loxahatchee, Florida; the American Floral Endowment; the Fred C. Gloeckner Foundation, a nonprofit corporation that finances floriculture research; Proven Winners, a brand of flowering plants; and the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

**Goals:** Next year’s plans includes 15 plant drops and more collaboration with the American Floral Endowment, replicating its student plant experiments with cut flowers and floral arrangements. The ultimate aspiration? “Become a presence on campuses nationwide,” Frazier said.

—K.H.V.



Fresh out of high school in 2005, Diana Fox got a job at Garden Gate, a retail flower shop in her hometown of Mexico, Missouri. The experience gave her immense satisfaction. She relished the creativity and enjoyed the company of her colleagues. Reluctantly, she stepped away from her “dream job” when she felt she needed a career with better pay and benefits.

“It was not an easy decision,” she said. “My heart was in floristry.”

Consequently, she took a position as a pharmacy technician.

The customer service overlap between the two jobs underscored a blatant difference.

“Flower buyers are, generally speaking, happy. It’s their choice to shop there,” she said. “No one comes to the pharmacy counter willingly. They’re there because they feel sick.”

For the better part of a decade, she spent her downtime researching flower schools.

“I wanted to be a florist, but I was still skeptical that I could do it and make a profit,” she said. In pursuit of her passion, she wanted “as much preparation as possible.”

She finally settled on the University of Missouri’s Plant Sciences program, which had curriculum that covered design basics, special events and retail management, a student-run flower shop (Tiger Garden) and a student chapter of the American Institute of Floral Designers (Mizzou SAIFD).

From 2015 to 2017, Fox juggled work responsibilities and her studies, commuting 45 minutes each way from Mexico to Columbia. Time constraints prevented her from working in the school’s retail shop, but she devoured her coursework and became active with Mizzou SAIFD. This summer, she attended AIFD Discover in Washington, D.C., her third annual symposium, where she entered the student design competition and won.

Fox opened her business, The Floral Den in March 2018, concentrating for now on wedding and event design.

At press time, she had just wrapped her first wedding with the help of her mother and husband.

“My biggest accomplishment so far,” she beamed. “I’m looking forward to more.”

**Goals:** Fox wants to develop a sophisticated brand that will attract the area’s most discerning brides. “My modern style isn’t really something Mexico has seen before.”

—K.H.V.



## GROWING THE FUTURE

You may have noticed a theme in this month’s story: A number of the people profiled received support from the American Floral Endowment. That’s no surprise. AFE supports educational efforts focused on attracting young people to the industry and retaining them. Find out more about the group’s scholarship, internship and educational grant opportunities at [endowment.org](http://endowment.org).



# The Adventurers

**Matthew Brady, Jason Thaete,  
Michelle Froelich, Matthew Elvena**  
Scenic Place Peonies  
Homer, Alaska

It's not often that something tangible comes from polite dinner conversation, but that's exactly what happened when Alaskan peony farmer Beth Van Sandt met Valerie Mellano, chair of the Plant Science Department at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, at an American Grown Field to Vase Dinner on Van Sandt's farm in July 2017.

As the women chatted, Van Sandt, owner of Scenic Place Peonies in Homer, Alaska, mentioned she was having difficulty finding interns to work on the farm for more than a few weeks. In an aha moment, Mellano suggested a partnership with Cal Poly.

This idea blossomed into reality when four interns, students from the Plant Science Department, arrived in Homer mid-June 2018 with plans to stay into the fall. Through the partnership, the students are getting hands-on experience across the farm's operations, starting with one-on-one training with Van Sandt. They are paid a stipend and receive free room and board.

Matthew Brady, a fourth-year student pondering a future in floriculture or ornamental horticulture, oversees the pack house, which includes supervising grading, de-leafing, flower processing and inventory management. He arrived with experience working in Cal Poly's greenhouses and retail nursery, and he's using his knowledge to help Van Sandt increase efficiency. Brady said the internship gave him a sense of the cut flower industry from a small-farm perspective. And it's supplementing his on-campus farming experience.

"Alaska is a niche environment with a different growing landscape. When we had a week straight of rain and then a week of pure sun, the growth rate was over 50 percent," Brady explained. "You don't see that in California."

Jason Thaete, who graduated from Cal Poly in June with a plant science degree, is tracking data on new peony varieties and managing vegetable production in four high-tunnel greenhouses. He's also been charged with scouting the flowers in the greenhouses for diseases and tracking bloom times. In addition, he set up a drip irrigation system, a skill he learned working on a campus vegetable farm.

"I came to learn about the types of flowers and the style of farm," Thaete explained. "It's one thing to read something in a textbook and another thing to apply it in the real world."

Recent Cal Poly plant science graduate Michelle Froelich is also helping with greenhouse vegetable production and an educational display garden, as well as the main farm. Froelich came to Scenic Place Peonies with vineyard, olive grove and herb farm experience, but was seeking ornamental production know-how.

Matthew Elvena, a fifth-year student, is helping with field maintenance and scouting for flower diseases; he also heads up irrigation on the farm. He's developing a routine for field checks that can be adjusted depending on that day's weather.

"I'm shadowing Beth so I can learn how to run a business," Elvena said. He's gained experience with her grading and irrigation systems and "how to be a 'people person' in order to sell a product" — all skills he hopes to put into practice when he starts a microgreens business after returning to Southern California.

**Goals:** Putting their knowledge to practical use. Froelich dreams of a career in horticultural therapy. Elvena can imagine starting his own farm, and both Thaete and Brady say their experiences have given them exposure to a career path they might not have recognized before. 🌱

—J.P.R.

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