

LOCAL GROWERS HELP FILL SUPPLY CHAIN GAPS

> In the wake of higher freight costs and limited supply brought on by COVID, local flower farmers are filling a much needed gap—while florists adapt their expectations.

Karen Yasui has raised flowers on a Tennessee Century Farm in the Raus community of Bedford County for 21 years. Her business, Petalland Flower and Herb Farm, uses organic practices and focuses on crops that “aren’t available anywhere else,” Yasui says.

The list includes summer favorites like zinnias and dahlias, along with a host of native wildflowers. “We’ve let some of the land grow up naturally as we manage for wildlife and pollinators, so we have wildflowers in abundance,” she says. “I can sustainably pick things like Solidago and white yarrow when they’re ready.”

In Nebraska, where corn and soybeans fill most of the fields, Jamie Rohda’s acre of blooms stand out. Her farm, Harvest Home Flowers, caters to florist customers who appreciate the freshness that the specialty cuts deliver. “The freshness aspect has become abundantly clear in the last year as shipping has gotten ridiculous,” Rohda says, referring to reliability and cost. “In Nebraska, everything has to be shipped in. We don’t have big flower markets here, so my florist customers are used to getting everything in a box. I deliver my flowers in a bucket of water. They’re

processed and ready to go. A customer can start arranging with my flowers the moment they’re delivered.”

Diversity Delivered

Local flower growers enable florists to tap into a wide variety of flower species. Many new growers focus on annuals, while more established farms are often harvesting perennials and shrubs, too. Yasui has been intentionally investing in shrubbery over the last decade. Her seasonal offerings extend from March through October and include hydrangeas, ninebark, viburnums, vitex (“with fabulous grain-like seedheads”) and fruited persimmon and beautyberry stems.

stems is brief, but it starts in early spring with pussywillow and forsythia before shifting into summer’s floral abundance, which includes Asclepias, monarda, bupleurum, Veronica, larkspur, allium, yarrow and Queen Anne’s lace. Local curly willow is a year-round staple.

Cathy Wallace, owner and manager of Heaven Scent Flowers & Gifts, located in Eagle Point, Oregon, is surrounded by many flower farmers. “I use 40 to 60% of locally grown material, depending on the season, which runs from April through September, or until the freezes come.” Her local product list includes lilies, hydrangea, delphinium, sunflowers and monkshood.

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— Karen Yasui, Petalland Flower and Herb Farm

“Florists like to try new things, and I like to try new things,” she says. “So, there’s always a certain amount of experimentation that happens here at the farm.” Yasui’s newest experiments include two perennials she grew from seed: patrinia and ‘Beaujolais’ lysimachia. “Patrinia is a great cut flower with a fine texture. It took three years for ‘Beaujolais’ (*Lysimachia atropurpurea*) to start producing. All of my customers have gone nuts over it this year.”

Rohda’s florist clients clamor for her dahlias. “Some clients say they won’t use dahlias for weddings unless it’s when mine are available,” she says. She’s also known for lisianthus. “I deliver a well-branched stem that opens multiple blooms because it’s picked at the right stage.” Rohda’s other florist favorites include tuberose and eucalyptus.

At Kennedy’s Flowers & Gifts in Grand Rapids, Michigan, brand ambassador Holly Haveman “absolutely loves to use locally grown flowers in our designs.” She estimates that their design team uses 10% to 20% local product. Michigan’s shorter growing season means the window for locally grown

Year round, she uses the region’s hardy greens, including evergreens, grape holly and rosemary. “I can’t describe how much pleasure it’s given me in my business and profit-wise, too, using evergreens,” she says. “People are enamored with them because they last and they’re unique. They’re great in large sprays and arrangements.”

Wallace has cultivated a relationship with Baldassare Mineo, the owner of a local rare plant nursery, Italo Gardens, which has a botanic garden on site. “He gives me an availability list, or he’ll cut things to order,” she says. “It’s amazing to have that resource right here on my doorstep.”

Conquer the Learning Curve

Both florists and farmers agree that locally grown material requires a little education for everyone to succeed. “Sometimes the local growers offer you such a unique item that you have to stretch your creativity as a designer,” Wallace says. Rohda handles that hurdle with her florist clients by letting them test a new crop. “When I try something new for the first time, I’ll take it to a few



PHOTO COURTESY HOLLY HAVEMAN

CHOICE CUTS Kennedy’s Flowers in Grand Rapids buys locally grown flowers for designer’s choice arrangements.

key florists. They test the crop; I test the price."

She finds that florists need to learn how to use the stems she grows one crop at a time. "I'm growing it, contacting them, delivering it to their door — it's an education process all along the way," she says. "Sometimes I grow something that a florist has quit using."

Dusty miller is an example. Rohda had a client who would never buy her dusty miller, so she asked why. The answer? Historically, he could never get dusty miller to hydrate. "I explained to him that the thing with dusty miller is that you can't let it dry — or it won't hydrate," she says. "Our stems are never dry. I gave him a bunch to try, told him to take it home and enjoy it. He's bought dusty miller from me ever since for weddings."

Sometimes florists have to educate customers on locally grown materials. "When I first started using local evergreens year round, my customers would say, 'That's Christmas,'" she says. "But people are receptive to new things, and now my brides love it. It's western and country — two big wedding themes now — and it goes great with hens and chicks."

Florists may collaborate with farmers in a teaching role. "We work with new flower farmers to help them figure out the varieties we like and share our input on branches and pricing," Haveman says. "We're honest and open with what we like that they grow and mentor growers on fair prices that allow us to buy more of their product."

Challenges of Local Flowers

Like any relationship, the farmer-florist connection can encounter hurdles. Product volume is one. "Florists are used to calling a wholesaler and ordering everything they need with one phone call," Rohda says. "I can't pull together product from all corners of the world. I'm super limited. The florist has to go to extra effort to order from places other than me. I also can't deliver tons of a particular flower."

For Haveman, the only disadvantage of locally grown material is that the season isn't as dependable, and the quantities may not be enough to support what she sells. When it comes to putting



PHOTO COURTESY HOLLY HAVEMAN

GO LOCAL Kennedy's features these locally grown favorites in their product mix.

an arrangement online, the same flowers may not be available a couple weeks after the design was originally created. "We typically use the local flowers in our designer's choice arrangements," she says. "Many orders come through the website by customers clicking on a picture, which is why the percentage of locally grown flowers we use isn't higher."

Yasui agrees. "As a grower, the most challenging thing is that florists want to order two to three months ahead — and I'm at the mercy of the weather. I check my books from years before to see how things produce and when, and I can do a pretty close prediction to what I'll have on a certain date. More experienced flower growers can do that."

For flower growers, having florists place orders promptly when availability lists arrive is important, as is being willing to try new things. All farmers love customers who pay promptly via electronic payment. "It's also ideal when a florist is totally flexible with specifics," Yasui says. "For instance, they might say they need a bucket in this color range. That lets me create a curated bucket that gives me leeway to include what looks good today in that color."

A Solution to Supply Chain Woes

Can local flower growers help bridge gaps in the supply chain? In season, the answer is yes, to a degree. Finding a local flower grower shouldn't be difficult. Judy Laushman, executive director of the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers, cites unprecedented growth in membership numbers — a 62% increase from 2017 to 2020, with 2021 figures on pace to surpass last year's numbers. Florists can find growers through their website (ascfg.org), or through Slow Flowers (SlowFlowers.com), which offers a directory of flower growers. Haveman also suggests visiting farmers' markets to identify local flower growers.

"I definitely encourage florists to work with local flower growers," Wallace says. "It's a huge advantage to have them right at your door or close by. The relationships you'll build are worthwhile. If a grower doesn't have what I want, they often know someone who does. That networking is priceless. It also opens your mind to community, and that's a nice way to live." 🌿

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