



Atlantic Bouquet

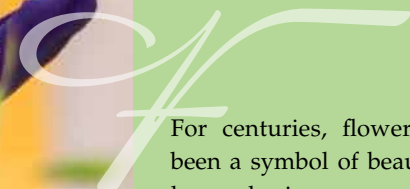
Peeling back the petals on flower farming on the East Coast

by Mary-Frances Lynch

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ELDIE PHOTOGRAPHY

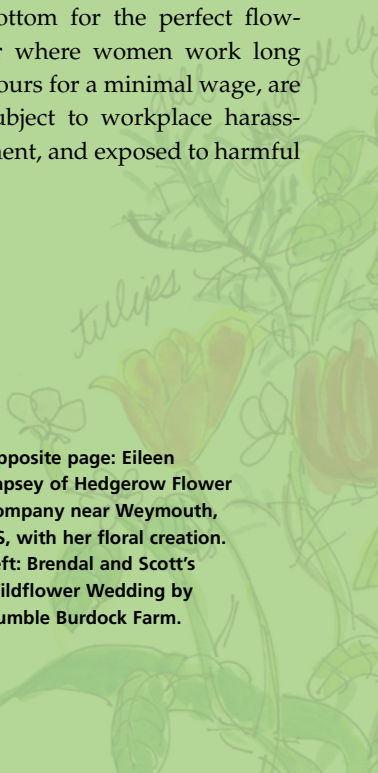


For centuries, flowers have been a symbol of beauty and love, sharing our messages of condolence, hope, and celebration. At first glance, their colour and elegance leave you uplifted, but as you lean in, the cut flower industry doesn't smell so rosy. In fact, it may not smell like anything at all with scent bred out in exchange for flawless aesthetic and longer vase-life.

For many flowers, the journey from field to florist begins in South America where, of the more than \$168-million of cut flowers imported into Canada in 2015, 57 per cent travelled from Colombia and 27 per cent from Ecuador. In these countries, an ideal growing climate brings big flower business, as well as the unpleasant byproducts of lower production costs and fewer regulations.

The result is a race to the bottom for the perfect flower where women work long hours for a minimal wage, are subject to workplace harassment, and exposed to harmful

Opposite page: Eileen Rapsey of Hedgerow Flower Company near Weymouth, NS, with her floral creation. Left: Brendal and Scott's Wildflower Wedding by Humble Burdock Farm.





Right: A floral bouquet from V's Flower Farm, owned and operated by Vanessa Hamming (below) in Bonshaw, PEI.



COURTESY OF V'S FLOWER FARM



JOANNA BROWN



COURTESY OF V'S FLOWER FARM

chemicals and ensuing health problems. The flowers they pick are dipped in a fungicidal soup and packed tightly in cold boxes to preserve them for the long journey, traveling some 5,000 kilometres to our local florist. Artificial fragrance is sprayed onto blossoms that have lost their scent while travel-weary bouquets are assembled for our special occasions. Peeling back the petals, it's hard to find much love left in that bouquet.

Budding Atlantic Canadian flower farmers

"Having flowers is supposed to be bringing something beautiful into your home. When people buy flowers from a flower farmer, they are choosing flowers that were grown with the health of the soil and the bees and ecosystem in mind. To me that adds even more beauty to a bouquet," says Vanessa Hamming of V's Flower Farm in Bonshaw, PEI. The wild foraged and garden-grown flowers she sells at the Summerside Farmer's Market are a world apart from the flowers brought in from Ecuador or Colombia.

Last year, Vanessa was among a group that gathered at Shannon Jones and Bryan Dyck's Broadfork Farm in River Hebert, NS to share their experiences as farmer-florists. "They offer a lot of benefits," says Shannon about her flowers' role attracting bees, birds, insects and soil microorganisms that

provide a healthy exchange on the farm. Broadfork is a certified "Bee Friendly Farm" through Pollinator Partnership, and a living example of the part honeybees (and other pollinators) and flowers play in pollinating food crops. With an estimated one in every three bites of food we eat resulting from bee pollination, it's easy to see the vital partnership between veggies and flowers. "It's an area that feels like it's full of life," says Shannon of their flowerbeds, which she envisions will take up over half of the farm in the coming years—a complement to the organic produce she and Bryan bring to the Dieppe Market.

Across the border, along the Petitcodiac River in Memramcook, new farmers Joanna Brown and Guy Gautreau have totally bought into the idea of flowers, growing them alongside specialty fruit and nut trees at Ferme Jolivent Farm. While travelling abroad Joanna saw how flowers were front and centre in the home and marketplace, and so upon return to the East Coast, the gap was obvious. "They nourish your soul instead of your belly," says Joanna of their decision to grow flowers instead of solely food crops.

But not everyone gets it. Guy sees a need for education and healthy conversation on the added value of local flowers. "We can't expect everyone to gravitate towards it without flower farmers meeting people halfway." To him that means having discussions with customers at the Moncton farmers market and liaising with local restaurant owners and other businesses.

Bringing flowers to market

Right now, the flower conversation is in full bloom. This past spring, Amanda Muis Brown who runs Humble Burdock Farms in Steam Mill, NS, hosted flower farmers from Cow Bay to Clare to talk flower shop.



TERRI-LYNN WARREN PHOTOGRAPHY

From top: Guy Gautreau harvesting flowers at Ferme Jolivent Farm in Memramcook, NB; Amanda Muis Brown assembling colourful bouquets with flowers from Humble Burdock Farms; flowers at Broadfork Farm in River Hebert, NS.



SHANNON JONES



EMMA FITZGERALD

Stepping back into the historical flower garden

Public flower gardens have a long history on the landscape. Halifax's Public Gardens were developed by Joseph Howe and the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society in 1841 when a 5.5-acre parcel of land was donated to the group, rent-free. Over the next 30 years, the "People's Garden" was expanded and manicured—creating the artistic geometrical beds recognizable today.

Over in the UK, a relationship with flower gardens is deeply rooted. Hedgerows dating back thousands of years are rich in historical and ecological significance, while the family garden was used for subsistence, medicine, and beauty. Today, with more than 500 public gardens listed on the Great British Gardens website and 3,800-plus private gardens hosting open visits to raise money for charity through the National Garden Scheme, you're never far from the flowers. "It's just part of the British psyche—tea and gardens and cake," says Eileen Rapsey of Hedgerow Flower Company.

Eileen's garden near Weymouth, NS, evokes nostalgia for a time when public flower gardens were ubiquitous. She grows hundreds of varieties of specialty organic flowers for weddings, events, and sale at the Annapolis Royal Farmers Market. With more than 50 types of roses, 40 varieties of lilies, and more than 140 types of tulips, among countless scented heirloom blossoms, shrubs, and herbs, a walk in her garden is a truly sensory experience.

Receiving formal training in wedding bouquet design from The Garden Gate Flower Company in the UK, her knack for flowers stems from childhood. Eileen is a veritable flower child—her first job was picking flowers on her parents' farms in the UK and US and appropriately uttered 'fleur' as her first word.

It's no wonder that today she surrounds herself with these familiar friends and wants to share them with others, be it neighbours, customers, bride and groom, and even fashion designers who want her breathtaking garden as their backdrop. Like the gardens of the UK, she has been hosting her own occasional open garden, inviting people to visit and make their own bouquets while enjoying the diversity of plants, butterflies and birds that fill her garden; along with tea and cake, of course.

EMMA FITZGERALD

Right: Flower farmer gathering at Broadfork Farm in River Hebert, NS, last year.
Below: Spring tulips at the market stand at Common Roots Urban Farm in Halifax, NS.

EMMA FITZGERALD



LUCIA STEPHEN



MARY-FRANCES LYNCH

After studying fine arts, ‘painting’ with flowers just made sense to Amanda with the colours of the season filling her palette. “Flowers have inspired people for thousands of years—painters, writers, sculptors, musicians across every culture... they have that ability to transcend language because it’s a connection to nature and beauty,” says Amanda, who now grows more than 150 types of flowers, grasses, and foliage. Selling flowers for more than five years at local markets, she is on her second year operating the province’s largest flower CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and is arranging flowers for more than 30 weddings a summer.

After a tour of her farm, Amanda leads the group of flower farmers into an old barn to discuss everything from public education to South American flowers, wedding bouquets to selling at markets. With barn swallows chirping overhead, the group broke ground with plans to form the Atlantic Canadian Flower Farmers Association, which Amanda thinks will show Atlantic Canada the importance of local flowers and the economic potential that comes with it.

Aly Kelly agrees, having seen firsthand how local cut flowers

make for good business. She volunteered at Toronto’s monthly flower market and witnessed how the beauty of flowers transformed not only an urban space but also people’s spirits—and with flowers selling out by noon on market days, it was also great for farmers.

Moving back to the East Coast last fall, she brought with her a vision of recreating Toronto’s flower market in Halifax. “I want people to walk into a market that is strictly flower and plant based and walk away with something that they know is local, beautiful, and will lighten up their day,” Aly says.

Farmers have jumped on board, as has Halifax’s Historic Brewery Market, hosting a flower market in August and another on September 17.

Healing flowers

Common Roots Urban Farm, a two-acre vegetable and flower farm in the heart of Halifax, is also part of the growing flower scene, selling bouquets at their on-site stand, offering a CSA to loyal customers, and adding fresh flowers to the dining rooms of restaurants in the city.

For Jayme Melrose, the farm’s co-ordinator, it’s about much more than selling flowers.

“I think flowers are such a symbol of health,” she says. Located on the doorstep of the QEII hospital, the farm’s colours, tastes, and smells offer a peaceful break from a hospital stay. On any given summer day you can observe visitors between the rows of lilies and dahlias, pausing to eat their lunch or simply breathe in the lush landscape. “This space could all be used for growing food, but flowers nourish us in a different way that I think is also necessary on a certain level,” says Jayme.

This urban space, along with the growing number of organic farmer-florists in Atlantic Canada, reconnect us with a healthier form of farming—one that embraces the seasonality of local flowers and doesn’t make sacrifices for that perfect rose. 🌹