



Sowing the Seeds of Love

Raised in an intimate and intuitive way, the timeless English garden flowers grown by small-scale, local farmers are gathering a loyal and appreciative following



Beside a water meadow bounded by willows and poplar trees on an especially picturesque stretch of the Thames in south Oxfordshire, Rachel Siegfried tends a six-acre plot of growing flowers. She jokes that her small flower farm – trading as Green and Gorgeous, which supplies wedding florists and farmers’ markets in the region – permits her to sustain a rather compulsive plant habit, as well as a particular way of life.

“I’m a plantaholic. I’ve always loved being outside and with nature. Watching the seasons change, being in tune, is very important to me. We grow organically here and I couldn’t do it any other way. I want to be part of the cycle with the insects and the birds,” she says.

Siegfried is one of many small-scale flower growers in England finding a niche in Britain’s approximately £2.2billion flower industry by rediscovering the varieties that would have appeared in our mothers’ and grandmothers’ gardens, and making them available to a growing and appreciative customer base. In their gardens, dahlias, cosmos, old-fashioned scented roses and fragrant sweet peas abound; hellebores, snowdrops and aconites pop up brave heads in winter, whilst brilliantly coloured crocosmia and showy globes of hydrangeas extend the summer cutting season into autumn. Between, a particular shade of voluptuous peony might be grown for an exacting floral designer, or a length of rambling rose supplied for a singular display.

INSPIRING ANTECEDENTS

In some respects, this type of flower production is not new at all. Shane Connolly, renowned for the notably seasonal floral schemes that defined the wedding of Catherine Middleton to HRH Prince William in Westminster

Abbey in 2011, notes that before plant material was air-freighted into the country from large flower farms abroad, it was natural to bring flowers from the garden into the home and, as a consequence, floral arrangements bore a looser, wilder style than the more formal designs that would come to the fore in the mid to late-twentieth century.

One exception to this later mode of practice might be found in Pulbrook & Gould. In the Sloane Street studio founded in 1956 by Lady Pulbrook and Rosamund Gould, cow parsley has always been as prized as lilies; wild blackberries as cherished as roses. Connolly, who trained there, recalls gardeners arriving at the shop premises with car-loads of flowers they had grown themselves.

Today, echoes of this earlier, somewhat romantic if slightly eccentric English style can be found in the work of designers such as Vic Brotherson of Scarlet & Violet, The Flower Appreciation Society and Flora Starkey, who has a background in fashion and fine art. “What we’re seeing now is a move back to that style of the early twentieth century,” Connolly notes. “Constance Spry did exactly this in the thirties and forties. Before then, flowers were done almost invariably by gardeners and even Gertrude Jekyll wrote a book about flowers in the house [*Flower Decoration in the House*, published in 1907]. Their approach was to bring flowers into the house and put them in water. Constance Spry developed this further, almost making an art form of choosing the right container and thinking of the architecture of the house, but still it had that looseness. Spry died in 1960, her name had been sold and I think the rigidity started about then.”

At Wardington Manor, also in Oxfordshire and where the first Lady ▶



OPPOSITE Wands of delphiniums growing in Rachel Siegfried’s cut-flower farm, Green and Gorgeous, in Oxfordshire, epitomise the abundance of an English summer. Once cut, flowers are conditioned in water before being prepared for sale. **CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Tulips are a perennially popular cut-flower choice in spring. A bouquet by Norfolk florist Jo Flowers includes locally sourced Japanese

anemone, phlox, clematis and jasmine. For Georgie Newbery of Common Farm Flowers, buckets of clean water and a trolley are essential. Victoria Martin of The Flower Garden at Stokesay Court, near Ludlow, Shropshire, is one of many growers around the country selling flowers on a small scale. Flowers are available arranged or by the bucket.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Rachel Siegfried of Green and Gorgeous gathers alliums, irises and cow parsley from her cut-flower garden in Oxfordshire.

The Land Gardeners began by growing cosmos for florist Vic Brotherson and has since developed its range to include over 40 types of flower.

Flora Starkey's painterly floral designs have various influences, from the Dutch masters to old Victorian wallpapers and Edwardian photographs.

"English roses are probably top of my

list [of favourite flowers], but peonies, tulips and ranunculus come in close behind," she says.

Rich and heady, sweet peas are especially popular, not least those growing at Holme Flowers, Yorkshire, just one of many newer flower farms that have sprung up in recent years.

Flowers at The Land Gardeners are cut at dawn.

They are then conditioned in buckets of water before being delivered to customers the same day.



Wardington grew the cut flowers she supplied to Pulbrook & Gould, Henrietta Courtauld and Bridget Elworthy rise at dawn to select fresh flowers to send to London the same day. Their business, The Land Gardeners, was developed in response to Vic Brotherson, who once remarked upon the limited plant material available to her. Elworthy recalls: "I said, 'Well, I'll do it for you if you like'. She probably thought, 'Oh yeah, she won't do it'. I said, 'Let's just experiment'." In the first year of experimenting, the pair picked buckets of cosmos, *Verbena bonariensis*, toadflax, viper's bugloss and goat's rue. As the business progressed, their list extended to lilies, foxgloves, euphorbias, sedums and stocks. This year, in anticipation of summer, the pair have prepared two 30-metre beds of dahlias.

"Many flowers are ubiquitous now," comments Courtauld. "If you go to a garage or a market, you see the same type of rather stiff flowers. There's a craving in people for something that's more romantic and natural," she says.

Siegfried concurs: "I am always trying to offer something that is a bit different from conventional growers. We have hundreds of metres of bearded iris, which you just would never see. It's just sheer decadence to cut those."

A TASTE FOR SEASONALITY

For so many flower farmers of this kind, seasonality is key. One contract of The Land Gardeners' is to provide a weekly supply of locally grown, seasonal flowers to interiors brand Soane Britain, intended for display in store. Owner Lulu Lytle felt that if she was going to champion British manufacturing, the sentiment should extend to the flowers displayed in her shop.

"From our customer's point of view, what is important is that seasonality. You might get a lovely bouquet in January, but it might be filled with tulips. We've lost that connection with the season," explains Courtauld.

That is not to say this burgeoning niche competes with the much larger,

international cut-flower industry; rather, it satisfies a completely different and growing sector of the cut-flower market, one widely believed to have originated in the slow-food movement and from general concern about provenance of the food we eat. "A lot of it comes from the west and east coasts of America, where people are very aware of where their food comes from and where it is produced. They've therefore become very aware of where flowers are grown and produced. That has begun to filter over here," explains Connolly.

Georgie Newbery, owner of Common Farm Flowers in Somerset, one of the most long-standing growers, puts it succinctly: "The people who won't buy strawberries in December are suddenly asking, 'Well, why buy roses when they're out of season in December?' Those customers are beginning to ask if there is anything in the UK that can be used instead. That's our basic customer base."

"Because we have a direct relationship with our customers, we can find people



who are sympathetic to our product very easily and those are not the people who are going to buy those other kinds of flowers at all," she adds.

Newbery began the business after moving to Somerset with her husband and, although the couple planned to be market gardeners, she soon found she was growing more flowers than vegetables. "I certainly was not alone. There are lots and lots of small businesses springing up all over the UK," she notes. Today, several umbrella bodies represent these growers, not least The British Flower Collective, which offers a handy directory of farmers catering to customers of varying scale, from wedding and event florists, to individuals buying directly from the farm gate. "We can grow and deliver a lot of material that the big importers simply can't, because they move their material around the world; this is especially true of more delicate buttercups and umbellifers, which don't hold up well to that treatment," Newbery explains. The New Covent Garden

Flower Market has gone so far as to establish British Flowers Week, now in its third year, which runs from 15-19 June and places focus on local and, often, organically grown flowers.

As with florist Flora Starkey and Elworthy (who left a career in fashion trend forecasting), Newbery brings a trained eye to her business, having once worked for American *Vogue* and John Galliano in Paris. Like her contemporaries, she calls upon a sense of the zeitgeist to inform her planting choices. Siegfried, too, is perceptive of and responsive to subtle shifts in taste, especially in the wedding market, where she sees shades of green and white and foliage being more prominent this year.

"You get a very strong feeling of what might be coming next," notes Elworthy. "In the last couple of years we have been on the cusp of a change with flowers and garden design. It's capturing a moment and people's feelings, and trying to translate it into what we grow." ▶



ABOVE Row upon row of sweet peas, dahlias and cosmos grow in high summer at Holme Farm in Yorkshire.

BELOW Beyond the romanticism of growing flowers, the job is hard work, being almost non-stop from May to November, which is the peak cutting season. The following year must also be

planned for: Georgie Newbery starts to plant biennials for the following spring in September. Like all forms of farming, flower growing is also intensely vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, such as prolonged rainfall or drought.

Valuable Resources

Suppliers of local cut flowers, propagation, materials, growing advice and floristry equipment

British Flowers Week A campaign from the New Covent Garden Flower Market runs from 15-19 June. Now in its third year, this is a national celebration of seasonal, locally grown flowers and foliage, aiming to unite UK cut-flower industry. Expect workshops and demonstrations from participating florists. Visit britishflowersweek.com

The British Flower Collective An online directory of floral businesses with a focus on British-grown flowers. The Collective supports and promotes floral designers, growers, schools, wholesalers and educational programmes that promote the use of British flowers and foliage. Visit thebritishflowercollective.com

The Cut Flower Patch by Louise Curley Published in 2014 (£20, Frances Lincoln), Curley provides sound advice on planting plans, varieties to grow and good plantsmanship. Insights on picking and floral design are particularly useful. Read her gardening blog at wellywoman.wordpress.com

Crocus Relied upon by top garden designers for material for their stands at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, Crocus also supplies individuals with better varieties of common plants, as well as gardening tools and accessories. Visit crocus.co.uk

Flowers from the Farm Over 200 smallholders, farmers and gardeners form this member body for British flower growers. The website has a directory of growers around the country, and a diary of workshops/events. Visit flowersfromthefarm.co.uk

Great British Flowers This fledgling umbrella organisation was established in 2014 to provide support to British growers of cut flowers. Visit greatbritishflowers.co.uk

Lamport Hall Take inspiration from what is thought to be one of the largest cutting gardens in England, in surrounds that were first planned in 1676. Redesigned in 2010, the walled cutting garden employs perennial material sourced from the nursery of one of the world's most sought-after garden designers, Piet Oudolf. Visit lamporthall.co.uk

Sarah Raven The doyenne of home-grown cut flowers offers an excellent selection of seeds, plugs and bulbs, as well as conditioning buckets, vases and floristry accessories such as snips, pinholders, tac, wire and cellophane sheets. Visit sarahraven.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Scented English roses are grown by The Land Gardeners.

Wild cow parsley is a popular choice. Many like to cultivate its domestic counterpart, *Anthriscus* 'Ravenswing', which has striking, plum-coloured stems.

A casual arrangement of garden flowers at Wardington Manor, Oxfordshire.



Selected Courses

Gain one-to-one advice and inspiration with suppliers of local cut flower courses

The British Flower School at Mapperton Gardens

Using only locally-grown flowers from local suppliers, courses run by Charlie Ryrie are held at the invitation of the Earl and Countess of Sandwich at Mapperton Gardens, near Beaminster, Dorset. Two forthcoming courses include Floristry on the Wild Side – considering hedgerow materials, wild flowers and cottage garden favourites – and Natural Wedding Flowers, which examines how to choose and prepare home grown and wilder flowers and hedgerow materials. For further details, telephone 01308 427355 or visit britishflowerschool.co.uk and cutflowergarden.co.uk

Flower Farming for Beginners

A workshop with Georgie Newbery, of Common Farm Flowers, will provide an introduction to what it takes to farm flowers, on however small a scale. Considerations include planting lists, pest control and balance as well as contingency planning. The workshop runs from 10am to 4pm on dates throughout the year, at Common Farm Flowers, Charlton Musgrove, Somerset. For further details, telephone 01963 32883 or visit commonfarmflowers.com ■



READER OFFER

The English Home is offering readers the chance to receive 30 per cent off and free UK delivery on a copy of *The Flower Farmer's Year* by Georgie Newbery. Buy it online for £13.99 (normal price £19.99) from greenbooks.co.uk/ flower-farmers-year and enter ENGLISHHOME2015 at check-out. Offer valid until 31 May 2015.