

YET ANOTHER  
GIRL GENIUS  
by DEB



Deb Bosworth is our Beach Farmgirl blogger (MaryJanesFarm.org). Deb is passionate about living a creative life and encouraging others to “make each day your masterpiece.” She brings us this series celebrating like-minded “girl geniuses.”

# slow flowers



I remember the very moment I was inspired to grow mega stems of cut flowers in my back yard like it was yesterday. It was while reading about starting a farmgirl business in *MaryJane's Ideabook, Cookbook, Lifebook*. Like many farmgirls, I was itchin' for a farm and a farmgirl business of my own. As always, MaryJane made it sound so easy when she shared her love for growing organic cut flowers on her farm, that I just had to give it a try. But she also mentioned that it was nearly impossible to compete price-wise with mass-produced cut flowers from foreign countries, and that the likelihood of us seeing florists selling organic flowers wasn't something we'd experience anytime soon. That was in 2005. I didn't let that not-so-little-known fact discourage me, though. I was filled with too much excitement to let my flash of inspiration burn out.

Fast-forward to 2017, and I've added “Backyard Flower Farmer/Florist and Slow Flowers Advocate” to my list of creative titles. On a much grander scale, American-grown, field-to-vase flowers have earned their rightful place at the table, right next to locally grown greens and grass-fed beef. Brides and event planners are choosing local flowers over imported varieties, and that's driving up the demand for local blooms, too. The flower renaissance we are experiencing now is the result of a new raised awareness about the benefits of local flowers to growers, consumers, and our communities. Enter Debra Prinzing, author of the book *Slow Flowers: Four Seasons of Locally Grown Bouquets from the Garden, Meadow and Farm* (St. Lynn's Press, 2013) and founder of the nationwide online directory of American-grown flowers, SlowFlowers.com.

Debra, from Seattle, also wrote *The 50 Mile Bouquet: Seasonal, Local and Sustainable Flowers* (St. Lynn's Press, 2012). Prior to Debra's books about sustainably grown flowers, there were only two notable flower-farming books getting much attention on a national level: Lynn Byczynski's *The Flower Farmer: An Organic Grower's Guide to Raising and Selling Cut Flowers*, first published in 1994, and Amy Stewart's *Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers* (2007), a behind-the-scenes look at the flower industry and how it has worked to create and sell flowers that, for better or worse, are far from any farm-fresh flower you or I will ever grow.

I asked Debra if the idea of the Slow Flowers movement was even on her radar as she was writing *Slow Flowers*, and she said, “Absolutely not. I was wearing my journalist's hat—playing the role of the unbiased observer

documenting a renaissance in domestic flower farming with *The 50 Mile Bouquet* and capturing my own relationship with my garden and the seasons with *Slow Flowers*. I didn't create this movement by any means; I just told stories about passionate individuals who were growing and designing with local flowers ... and it kind of took on a life of its own. It was several years before I felt comfortable assuming the role of a spokesperson or public advocate, but I believe the fact that I'm not a designer or flower farmer gives me more autonomy—and therefore, credibility—in the media and marketplace.”

Debra first began to see a shift in “flower consciousness” as far back as 2006, when she first met Erin Benzakein of Floret Flowers (featured our “Ladyslipper,” Oct/Nov 2008 issue). At the time, she was a young mom growing sweet peas and dreaming of making her living from flowers. She was also a garden writer scouting a story in Washington's Skagit Valley, where more tulip, iris, and daffodil bulbs are produced than in any other county in the U.S.

“Having my consciousness raised was one thing,” says Debra. “Trying to get my editors and publishers to agree with me was entirely another. I actually had a major lifestyle editor with whom I had previously worked tell me that the notion of local, seasonal, and organic flowers was “fringe” and not mainstream enough to interest anyone. That was back in 2009, and it only motivated me to continue relentlessly, to talk and write about what I knew would eventually become a true cultural shift. And yet, with imports still comprising 80 percent of cut flowers sold in the U.S., it's hard to say there has been a dent made in that multibillion dollar floriculture machine.”

Changes in the current domestic floral landscape are measured in more subtle ways, Debra says. “I know that we can look at social-media numbers anecdotally, such as the

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# Where Do Your Flowers Come From?

Currently, the U.S. imports around 80% of flowers sold. With the support of consumers, American flower farms could be filling many more vases across the country.

**74%**  
of consumers don't know the origins of their flowers

**58%**  
of consumers would prefer American Grown, if given a choice

**58%**  
of U.S. flower farms have gone out of business since 1992 mostly due to low-cost imports.

**Flower Farmers** Flower farms, large and small, are located in all 50 states. Mostly family owned, they use many sustainable practices to grow thousands of beautiful varieties to supply the distribution channels of the floral industry.

**Wholesalers** Many wholesalers purchase flowers globally in a marketplace where country-of-origin labeling is not required or enforced. Some wholesalers source from domestic flower farms, but the majority do not.

**Grocers** Grocery stores and supermarkets purchase large quantities of flowers by the bunch or in mixed bouquets. They typically source from wholesalers, although some import flowers directly. Some also source flowers from U.S. flower farms.

**E-commerce** Most large online floral retailers buy directly from South American farms and ship those bouquets to U.S. consumers. Others act as the marketing middleman for florists who fulfill orders with mostly imported flowers.

**Florists** Florists purchase flowers and greens from wholesalers and flower farms. Only those who buy directly from U.S. flower farms or from wholesalers who label the source of flowers can honestly tell customers where their flowers were grown.

**YOU: the floral consumer**

## Imported Flowers

Miami International Airport handles **91%** of the fresh flowers imported per year

**200,132** TONS of flowers land in Miami each year

**40,000** boxes of flowers ARRIVE DAILY

During the weeks of Valentine's Day and Mother's Day

**80,000-120,000** boxes of flowers ARRIVE DAILY

That Equals:

**SEVEN Daily Flights SIX Days per Week**



infographic: SlowFlowers.com

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exploding volume of followers some of the hot farmer-florists are currently enjoying. The growth of membership in SlowFlowers.com, which includes floral designers and flower growers/farmers, is one indicator—we launched three years ago with 250 members, and we have grown to 700. Membership in the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG.org) has increased in that period, as well."

Debra personally tracks the hashtag use of #slowflowers, which is up to 3.5 million impressions per month on Instagram and Twitter alone. Closer to home, Debra has been involved with the pioneering Seattle Wholesale Growers Market, a flower-farmer-owned cooperative that began in 2011, which she's documented for the past six years. SWGM reported recently that the Market's sales have grown from \$350,000 when it launched in 2011 to \$1.3 million in 2016. These figures represent new sales of local flowers previously not realized in the wholesale market here in the Pacific Northwest and are expected to hit \$1.67 million in gross sales for 2017. Debra also stated that a 2014 USDA study found floriculture to be the most profitable or best value-added crop for small farms under \$500,000 in revenue.

There's steady movement on the political front for domestic cut flowers, as well. For the past nine years, a group of flower farmers led by Kasey Cronquist (CEO of the California Cut Flower Commission and Administrator of the Certified American Grown floral branding program, AmericanGrownFlowers.org) have participated each winter in a flower-farmer fly-in to advocate for domestic flowers in our nation's capital. Debra was privileged to join the group for the past three years. She had the opportunity to meet one of her two senators, Senator Patty Murray. She's also had the privilege to speak at briefings about cut flowers, including one at the 2014 launch of the Congressional Cut Flower Caucus, along with former Representative Lois Capps and Representative Duncan Hunter.

While a non-farmer herself, Debra was included in fascinating conversations between flower farmers from a number of states with their members of Congress or agricultural-policy staff members. Guided by Kasey Cronquist and government relations advisor Bill Frymoyer, these meetings deliver several short-and-sweet messages. They often touch on issues like country-of-origin labeling enforcement, labor/employment/immigration laws, and asking for American-grown flowers to be used in the White House and at state dinners and other White House functions.

This year, a record number of flower farmers representing nine states returned for the caucus, and Debra interviewed Kasey Cronquist on her Slow Flowers podcast at DebraPrinzing.com to hear his updates. "He was upbeat and optimistic about some of the policy issues that the new Congress is interested in, and he was mostly jazzed about seeing a new bipartisan group of Representatives agree to join the Congressional Cut Flower Caucus," she reports. One thing you can do is look into the Congressional Cut Flower Caucus to invite your own Representative to join. (Look for more details at VoteForFlowers.org.)

As a member of Debra's Slow Flowers Directory and founder of the New England Farmer Florist Connection Facebook group, I was invited to be a guest on her Slow Flowers podcast show in February to discuss the New England Farm and Floral Meet-and-Greet in March, which I co-hosted. I started the NEFFC Facebook group in March 2016 to see how many New England flower farmers and floral designers might be "out there" looking for a way to connect. A year later, the group has grown to about 220 members. With such encouraging numbers, I had a hunch it might be time for an "in-the-flesh" meeting of the minds, so I polled the group online to see if there was any interest ... and was there ever! The location for the meet-and-greet couldn't have been more picture-perfect. Sixty flower farmers and

florists gathered in a member's barn studio for an afternoon of education and inspiration. The buzz in the barn was electrifying! Every New England state was represented. Many new friendships, kinships, and partnerships were born that day. Suffice it to say, there will be more gatherings and good works in the future.

All that we aspire to do through social media is irrelevant if we are unable to make a real human connection with one another. Don't you agree? Ever since launching SlowFlowers.com, Debra has made a point of reaching out to flower farmers and florists whenever she travels (which is often). It began with asking to visit and tour their farms or floral studios, and that quickly expanded into having potluck dinners, meet-ups, and more sophisticated regional gatherings with workshops.

One of the most unique things about the Slow Flowers ethos is that it serves as a place to connect not only consumers with their flowers, but to connect farmers and florists. By facilitating the growth of business-to-business relationships between those who grow and those who design, Debra believes that Slow Flowers plays a role that no other professional organization in flower farming plays. "We stimulate conversations, connections, collaboration—and thus, community. Micro-regionalism is on the rise, and now these spontaneous meet-ups and gatherings occurring without my physical presence, which is fine with me," Debra says. "It's gratifying to watch."

Debra knows these region-specific groups are going to get a lot more accomplished, because people-to-people connections are where meaningful things take place. And people like to do business with those they know and feel a fondness for. "It's kind of the golden rule," she says. Sure, you can 'meet' on Instagram or Twitter, but the meaningful work begins when you shake a hand, exchange a smile or hug, or share a meal (and a bouquet) together, right?