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SLOW FLOWERS

BY JESSIE KEITH

IN THE COMMERCIAL CUT-FLOWER INDUSTRY, it's not easy being green. Most cut flowers are laden with pesticides, largely because the estimated \$40-billion-a-year industry demands floral perfection, and some of its powerhouses (like roses) are especially susceptible to pests and diseases.

To complicate matters, most commercial flowers travel hundreds and thousands of "flower miles" from field to international flower market to wholesaler to store. Today, however, natural beauties are gaining attention and challenging the status quo. An influx of eco-conscious growers and designers are embracing the so-called Slow Flower Movement—aided by a suite of savvy writers and other advocates furthering their cause.

It's safe to say that Amy Stewart brought the concept of the "socially responsible cut flower" to public attention through her engaging New York Times bestseller on the international flower industry, *Flower Confidential* (Algonquin Books, 2007). And her message of awareness resonates even more as the Slow Flower Movement gains ground. "There are a lot of reasons to buy local when it comes to flowers," Amy tells us. "You get something really fresh, seasonal, and delicate." A point further explored in Debra Prinzing's beautifully photographed, insightful book *The 50 Mile Bouquet* (St. Lynn's Press, 2012). When asked why she wrote the book, Debra said, "As I met and interviewed domestic flower farmers and eco-conscious floral designers, I discovered the beginnings of a cultural shift to local, seasonal, and sustainable flowers. This book strives to put a face on the flower farmer and help consumers make a connection between growers and flowers they bring into their homes."

And connecting the public with local flowers is most easily done through the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG) an organization founded in 1988 to help consumers find local growers. Polly Hutchison, flower

farmer and current president of the ASCFG, says, "As an organization we don't referee organic status, but we encourage good land stewardship, sustainable practices, and connecting the public with local growers; it pays to know your grower, and this relationship is best forged locally."

Pennsylvania has a good share of pioneering local cut-flower purveyors—most in and around metropolitan areas where demand is greatest. Successful, small-scale growers are many and they supply farmers markets and shops statewide, but of these, a few have built blossoming businesses that are truly extraordinary.

Jennie Love, of Love N' Fresh Flowers, is one of the more remarkable PA pioneers. She has the rare pleasure of running a three-acre flower farm in Upper Roxborough, just within Philadelphia city limits. In only five years it has blossomed into a 90-hour-a-week endeavor that keeps growing. This is due to her beautiful fresh-from-the-field flowers and unique, elegant arrangements that are wholly seasonal and sustainably grown. She offers a complete "seed to centerpiece" package, and despite being a gifted floral designer, she considers herself a flower

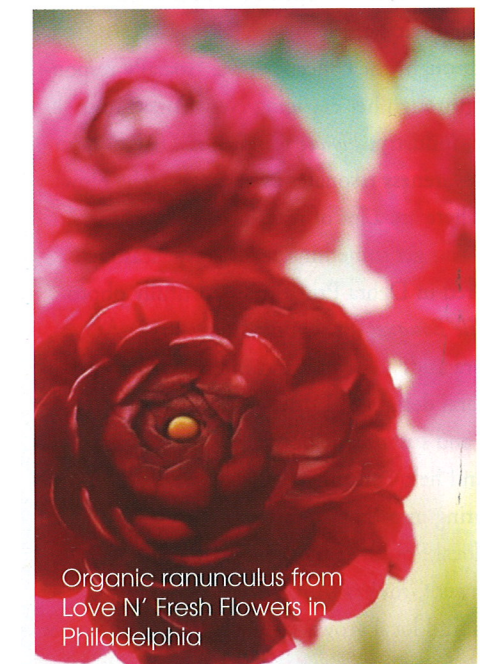
farmer at heart. "I grew up on a central Pennsylvania farm; it's in my blood," she says.

The rigors of urban flower farming keep Jennie busy from dawn to dusk. "Growing local, organic flowers is hard work!" she says. This is something Kate Sparks, of the Doylestown design-grow flower farm Lilies and Lavender can equally attest to: "I've had four acres in production for the past 15 years—for such a small farm it's a huge effort but worth it. I wouldn't want more acreage; it's easier to control pests and problems when you're small. Still it has its challenges."

Both Jennie and Kate cite lack of public awareness regarding the value of local flowers as a problem. "There's a reverse mentality about our flowers. Most think they should be cheap, but they're actually more costly," Jennie says. "With the Slow Flower Movement taking hold, I hope perception will change. It's hard competing with low-priced imports that are loaded with pesticides but pretty."

As public awareness increases, they reckon, the beauty, diversity, seasonality, and longevity of "green" cut flowers should sell themselves. In addition to being earth-friendly, they last longer, and small growers can take more creative license with diverse, more exciting floral choices. They also come without the baggage of imported flowers. According to Kate Stewart, "Flowers coming from a long way away require constant refrigeration to stay fresh. That is a very high energy cost." And, Kate Sparks says, "Even out-of-country organics are not organic. Imported organic flowers are sprayed with chemicals before entering the country to keep potential pests out, making them fumigated flowers."

Pesticides are the greatest problem with roses, which make up around 30 percent of all US flower sales (SOURCE: US International Trade Commission), and are the most energy-intensive, pesticide-laden blooms of the bunch. Thankfully, Debra



Organic ranunculus from Love N' Fresh Flowers in Philadelphia

says eco-conscious growers are making headway here, too. "A handful of domestic rose growers around the country produce beautiful American roses and strive to be sustainable," says Debra. "If consumers start asking their florists and retailers for American-grown roses, the demand can be met."

So if there's a market, there's a way. Ultimately, public demand, driven by greater awareness, will power the Slow Flower Movement to keep naturally beautiful flowers decorating our life events and making us happier. As Polly Hutchison puts it, "Local, sustainable flowers are gratifying and better for us all." ■

RESOURCES

- **Love N' Fresh Flowers**
lovenfreshflowers.com
- **Lilies and Lavender**
liliesandlavender.com
- **Red Earth Farm**
redearthfarm.org
- **greenSinner**
greensinner.com

