

ROCKY MOUNTAIN FLOWERS

Vibrant, Colorado-grown flowers tell a story of one farming family – and their stewardship of the land

The Boulder County Farmers' Market opens for the season on the first Saturday in April and continues through the third Saturday in November. Reputed to be the state's only exclusively grower-served public market, the 25-year-old farmer-run enterprise is where buyers from all around the Boulder-Denver region can find luscious-looking (and tasting) produce, freshly-bottled honey, artisanal baked goods and locally-grown plants and flowers.



We arrived early one May morning to meet **Chet and Kristy Anderson** of The Fresh Herb Company. The Andersons had attended our lecture at the Denver Botanic Gardens earlier in the week, but we were eager to see in person how this talented couple grows and sells flowers, Rocky Mountain style. Even though they live in USDA Zone 5 (-10 to -15 degrees Fahrenheit average minimum temperatures), which means little farming occurs from November to April, the Andersons have built their farm into a thriving family business.

If our visit to the farmers' market was any indication, the success of The Fresh Herb Company demonstrates that locally-grown flowers can give a farm its competitive edge. This cultural shift in the way people respond to high-quality blooms is due in no small part to passionate individuals like Chet and Kristy and their commitment to sustainable farming.

Belle Anderson, Chet's vivacious mother, greeted us with a generous smile and obvious pride in her offspring's enterprise. She's been handling sales at The Fresh Herb Company's stall from day one, when in 1987, Chet and a half dozen other growers established the market. While Kristy and Belle readied for the day's opening, Chet took David and me on a tour. As we tasted delicious samples of fruit and admired the cornucopia of produce-laden tables, it was apparent to us that Chet is the unofficial mayor of the market. He has a ready "Hello, how's it going?" and a warm handshake for everyone he meets, from longtime friends and fellow vendors to regular shoppers. This is a fabulous community of like-minded individuals who come together for the simple transactions between farmer and customer.

Since it was still early in the season, The Fresh Herb Company's stall was stocked with lots of 11-inch hanging baskets overflowing with a cheery mix of annuals, just in time for Mother's Day gift-giving. Racks of culinary herbs in 4-inch pots enticed foodies eager to get their kitchen gardens planted. And taking center stage: hundreds of long-stemmed Asiatic and Oriental lilies.

Thanks to the bright, warm environment inside The Fresh Herb Company's 15,000-square-foot greenhouse, these lilies are the first cut flower crops of the season. "We could grow a lot more in the greenhouse if we had more space," Chet says. "But for now, our scale and market size are pretty well aligned, allowing us to concentrate on the quality of our plants and flowers and the value they bring to customers."

Farm Visit

Next, we accompanied Chet to the 10-acre family farm in Longmont, about 20 minutes from Boulder, where he and Kristy had agreed to host a group from the Denver Botanic Gardens on a farm tour – a follow-on to our talks earlier that week. We gladly tagged along, camera and notebook in hand, to watch and record yet another facet of The Fresh Herb Company's unfolding story.

Chet and Kristy meld their sustainable farming philosophy with smart business practices. They serve as a model for newer flower farmers who wish to generate a living wage from their land. Like many contemporary farmers, theirs is a lifestyle pursued with intentionality, Chet says. A native of Boulder, he was close to completing a Master's in Urban Planning when he discovered the writings of poet and essayist Wendell Berry. Smitten with the notion of stewarding and preserving his own corner of the earth, Chet realized that "I wanted to be a farmer rather than fly a desk."



Top: Inside 15,000-square-foot of greenhouses, The Fresh Herb Company gets a jump on springtime, planting hundreds of hanging baskets, culinary herbs and lilies for the cut flower trade.

Opposite: Flower farmer Chet Anderson, pictured at the Boulder County Farmers' Market, has been growing cut flowers for nearly 25 years. He and his wife Kristy Anderson have expanded The Fresh Herb Company to a successful operation that supplies 30 Whole Foods grocery outlets in five states.



Above: With the vast Colorado sky overhead and rows of perennials at his feet, Chet Anderson is a farmer who loves his work. Flower farming is a physically challenging profession, but this personable guy can't imagine doing anything else.

Avid foodies, Chet and Kristy started The Fresh Herb Company in 1983, growing culinary herbs, baby vegetables and salad greens for high-end restaurants in Boulder and Denver.

“Even when we specialized in herbs and salad greens, we always grew flowers to sell at the Boulder County Farmers’ Market,” Chet points out. When organic salad mixes crossed the line from field crops to processed food, they divested that arm of the business to focus only on culinary herbs, hanging baskets and cut flowers, including perennials, annuals and blooms from flowering shrubs.

Hugging the curve of the bucolic, tree-lined Lefthand Creek, six of the farm’s 10 acres are planted with cut flower crops. The property contains highly desirable loamy soil –

“You can grow just about anything in this dirt,” Chet maintains. The seeds of annual larkspur, bachelor’s buttons, bells of Ireland and corn cockle are direct-sown in fields irrigated by pond water that’s pumped through a series of natural sand filters and overhead irrigation lines. Perennials, including monk’s hood, Jerusalem sage, phlox, Veronica and peonies, reliably produce blooms year after year. Even during Colorado’s hot summers, the climate here is moderated by cool air that settles by the creek every evening. Pests and diseases are nearly non-existent, thanks to proper selection of disease-resistant varieties and sustainable cultural practices that encourage the beneficial insects that feed on pests. Inside the greenhouse, rows of luscious lilies grow near tables of herb seedlings. Hundreds of seasonal hanging baskets create a verdant canopy overhead – all are given their early-spring start inside the sheltered setting. Chet and Kristy also lease an 18-acre parcel down the road, where they grow numerous varieties of sunflowers, zinnias and ornamental grasses to sell for cut bunches and bouquets. It’s their own little slice of Provence in Colorado!

Farm visits are welcome, giving the gregarious Chet a storytelling platform. “Everybody has one reason or another for buying local, be it shrinking your carbon footprint or employing local youth. But ultimately, people are drawn to our plants and flowers by the story they tell: that they are grown by friends down the street who live in the old school-house; that they are beautiful, fresh-picked and will last in a vase for days and days.”

Farm to Customer

Today, among other outlets, The Fresh Herb Company sells herbs, planted baskets, flowers and bouquets to 30 Whole Foods stores in Colorado, New Mexico, Utah,

Missouri and Kansas. “Whole Foods does a great job of telling the story of the farmers they support,” Chet says. He credits the success of the farmer-market relationship to Whole Foods’ outstanding commitment to local growers and his own pledge to provide the retail chain with superior products.

Chet and Kristy take care to nurture their Whole Foods relationship. “We’re very accessible,” Chet says. “We have groups of Whole Foods people out here during the summer for lunches and tours – from the accountants to the regional produce people to staff of individual stores. Coming here helps them better tell our story to their customers.”

According to Robert Glover, the produce and floral coordinator for Whole Foods’ Rocky Mountain Region, the company defines “locally-sourced” as product grown within a seven-hour radius by truck. Many of the stores in his five-state region also carry “micro-local” produce that may be grown within a two-hour radius. “We really want to see seasonal, local, organic and good value,” Glover says. “When they all hit together, that’s beautiful.”

Whole Foods shoppers have a high awareness and often a personal connection with locally-grown products. So when The Fresh Herb Company’s flowers are labeled “Grown in Colorado,” it resonates. “We at Whole Foods love being able to work with a grower like Chet, especially because we’re able to meet face-to-face, visit his farm and

invite him into our stores,” Glover says. “It’s hard to even think about putting a price on that relationship – it’s such an intangible.”

The Fresh Herb Company’s high-quality flowers are also in demand elsewhere in the Rocky Mountain region. “A lot of flower consumption is happening at the super-market level,” Chet says. “As the availability of fresh, locally-produced, specialty cut flowers increases, we’ll see more and more participation from independent retailers and floral designers. But we’re just scratching the surface of the opportunity to get our product to these end users.”



Above: A medley of mixed annuals spills over the edge of a hanging basket, one of 5,000 baskets that The Fresh Herb Company plants and sells each spring.

A Year on a Flower Farm, by the Numbers

“Our bouquets are always something non-formulaic,” Chet says. “We use complementary or contrasting colors; a combination of greenery and woody textures; and varied heights of stems.”

- 12,000 mixed bouquets
- 25,000 sunflower bunches
- 10,000 lily bunches
- 10,000 peony bunches
- 5,000 hanging baskets
- 100,000 potted herbs