



Heart of the Country

The joy of farming – in every season – sustains the owners of one Oregon flower farm where land, wildlife and people are nurtured.

As farmland matures and evolves, so do those who steward it. Just ask **Charles Little**, who has been tending to ornamental crops in the verdant Willamette Valley since 1986. He describes the 40 abundant acres at the foot of Oregon’s Mount Pisgah, where he and his wife **Bethany** grow 250 varieties of fresh flowers, fillers, wildflowers, herbs, ornamental grains and grasses, seasonal berries, pods and branches, as a “horticultural paradise with its own thriving ecosystem.”

“I was one of those young men who wanted to create a hippy commune and be a farmer,” Charles says of his early years. “I’ve always wanted to live and make my living on the land.” More than 25 years

after planting his first flower crops, he maintains that “farming is a lifestyle, a stewardship and commitment to the land and a generous consideration of all life around you, from the beneficial microorganisms and insects, to the birds and snakes.”

When starting out, Charles rented 15 acres from a retired peppermint farmer. He planted everlasting crops – annual and perennial flowers that hold their color and form when dried. “I was like a traveling salesman,” he recalls of the snapdragons, larkspur, statice and other flowers harvested and delivered to floral and craft wholesalers in Portland.

Today, the flowers harvested from Charles Little & Co.’s fields satisfy demand for nearly every color, form and type of plant ingredient used by wedding, floral and event designers. On the

Above: Charles and Bethany Little prefer to work in tandem with the seasons, rather than using heated greenhouses to jump-start or extend their harvest. “The southern Willamette Valley has a growing climate that’s hard to beat, so I cooperate with mother nature,” Charles says.

Opposite: Interplanting two otherwise unrelated crops, like sweet peas and onions, is just one way to make the most of limited planting space. Or, as is the case at Charles Little & Co., serendipity occurs and the pairing, oddly, makes sense.

West Coast, wholesale buyers snap up the prolific farm’s field-grown crops at the Los Angeles Flower Market, Portland Flower Market and Seattle Wholesale Growers Market.

A Growing Passion

During the peak season, from June through October, customers buy direct from Charles and Bethany at their U-Pick flower fields in Eugene, which operate as Sparhawk Farms. Bridal parties consult with Bethany who helps them select their wedding flowers, floral palette and design needs – from full-service bouquets to do-it-yourself. Grower’s bunches sell for \$6 to \$10, and if customers want to harvest their own blooms, the pricing is simple: They pay \$4 for as many stems as fit inside a one-inch ring.

There is great value in this approach, Charles says. “Aside from inexpensive access to cut flowers, people who come to our U-Pick fields get to experience farmland under their feet, bask in the northern sun and feel the wind in their faces – just like a flower farmer does every day.” Moms and daughters; sisters and cousins; kids, too, visit the farm for flowers. Charles fantasizes about these multigenerational outings: “Can you imagine the bonds that perhaps develop? These bonds – and memories – will be with them forever.”

Charles Little & Co. adheres to *permaculture*, or sustainable land-use design. For example, 70 percent of the acreage is occupied by well-established trees, shrubs and herbaceous perennials, plants that “require little care, fertilizer or weeding, and are self-sustaining,” Charles explains. “The beauty of plants like ornamental cherry trees or flowering viburnum is that we’re doing most of the pruning needed by virtue of doing the harvest. I’m the guy who has the weird shrubbery that’s naturalized out in his fields.”

Observing the natural cycle of each season is a joyous experience of which he never tires. In fact, Charles describes it as “thrilling to watch when an annual has just enough left over to self-sow, creating a carpet of seedlings in the fall or spring.” A little attention, organic fertilizer, the moisture of seasonal showers, and some hand-weeding . . . leads to the anticipation of “the glorious bounty,” he adds.

Grower’s Wisdom: Inter-planting

When it comes to land stewardship, Charles relies on both experience and inspiration. He often recalls biodynamic gardening techniques he employed as a young man living at Farallones Institute, a Northern California educational center and commune. “We would inter-plant anything we could think of, like pairing lettuce crops with broccoli crops. By the time the lettuce heads were big and ready to be harvested, we were making space for the long-season cauliflower or broccoli to grow larger.”

Here is how this approach is manifested on a flower farm:

Onions and sweet peas: “A friend gave us 800 onion sets and we thought, Where are we going to plant these? We’d already planted the sweet peas and I knew the ground was naturally good. So we planted onions on either side of the sweet pea trellis. It ended up being a really great idea because the onions grew and their leaves supported the young sweet peas.”

