

Notes on Slow Flowers

Monday, July 2, 2019

Notes in preparation for the conversation with Debra Prinzing.

Maryland Cut Flower Growers Association

The MCFGA (<http://marylandgrownflowers.com>) is an interest group of cut flower growers around the Chesapeake Bay. Our website was built with a grant from the Maryland Department of Agriculture, which means the Maryland farms get top billing there, but lots of your old friends from Virginia, Delaware, and Pennsylvania join us for the meetings as well.

There are a nice mix of newer growers like us and farms who have been doing this for a long time. The flowers we brought to your event in DC were from our farm and from the farm of our friend Suzanne Montie of Red Chimney Farm in Bowie, MD - she and other growers like her have been making it go for decades, and they take friendship with us new farmers very seriously.

The group organizes three meet-ups a year at the Maryland Department of Ag, which are open to all growers. I'm the treasurer, which is a really easy job, because we don't have a bank account and we don't file taxes. I'm basically in charge of keeping track of a couple hundred bucks of petty cash that we occasionally use for buying cookies for the meetings. The other board members have harder jobs, I think. You already met up with Melane (<http://hiddenridgeflowersandherbs.com/>) and Madgee (<http://www.mandmplants.com/>) who are the president and vice president, and Carin Celebuski of Ladybrook farm (<https://www.facebook.com/LadybrookFarm>) rounds out the board.

We've benefited in this area with a number of local florists who design exclusively with local flowers. Local Color in Baltimore and Little Acre in DC come to mind, and they're special to the group. Now there are starting to be more florists who are incorporating local flowers in their mix, but I think for a long time the only way to sell local flowers was for farmers to go find customers themselves, either cultivating relationships with nearby florists or selling at farmers markets.

About Us, About Our Friends

Our farm is @rightfieldfarm on the social places, and rightfieldfarm.com if you're not into social media, but you still love flowers. This is our fourth full season, and we sell at grocery stores, we do Sunday Deliveries on our website, and we are doing more and more weddings.

We've been on the farm for nine years, and this is our fourth season flower farming (after trying a lot of different things). The name of the farm comes from the fact that the property used to be a baseball field, and the house sits in right field. Plus, we were both the sort of kid who sat in right field picking buttercups.

There are some special relationships that I want to mention, because they're important. One is the relationships with people like Suzanne Montie who I mentioned earlier. We buy flowers from Suzanne, so we're a customer. And we ask for advice from Suzanne, because she's a wise and experienced grower. We share our triumphs and challenges, because we're friends. And we could theoretically compete directly with Suzanne because we both sell flowers, though it's never actually come up. We have both referred customers to one another.

There are quite a few other growers who fit in this place for us. Laura Beth Resnick of Butterbee Farm in Baltimore (<http://butterbeefarm.com>) and Maya Kosok of Hillen Homestead, also in Baltimore (<http://hillenhomestead.com>) were both previously on the board of the MCFGA. They're both farms we've ordered flowers from, done cooperative orders with, and been friends with through the MCFGA.

Another neat thing about the MCFGA is that there are some amazing growers who have PhDs in horticulture, who literally wrote the book on weeds of the region, and who share knowledge and plants - Rick and Wen Fei Uva of Seaberry Farm come to mind (<http://seaberryfarm.com/>). Our quince plants came to us from extras that Rick had a couple years back and he brought to one of the MCFGA meetings.

The other special set of relationships for us is obviously our customers. David's Natural Market in Gambrills was an early supporter and has continued to sell our flowers and pay their invoices like clockwork (gotta love that! <http://www.davidsnaturalmarket.com>).

Big Tent!

It's really important to us to make friends with anyone who has interest in growing and enjoying flowers. Flower growing has really taken a hit over the past few decades in the US, and it's easy to feel blamey, but it's a trap! Anyone who grows flowers is an ally. Anyone who buys flowers is an ally. It's a hard thing to remember sometimes.

There are some trends and fads that have affected virtually everyone in the flower business. There are lots of reasons that baby's breath, roses, mums, and carnations took off. They lend themselves to large-scale growing, they ship well, and they hold up to all kinds of treatment. Plus, don't forget, they're pretty! But they're 2% of what a local grower in Maryland has to offer you, and a bouquet of roses doesn't have anything over a mixed bouquet of the thirty flowers that are blooming nearby where you live.

Of course, I say this, and I'll admit to you in the next sentence that I love our roses, I love our baby's breath, I love our carnations, and I love our mums. But we really do grow two hundred kinds of flowers, so I wasn't kidding when I said two percent.

Vendors

We have so many vendors we've worked with even over the short number of years we've been in business. Leon and Carol Carrier of Plantmasters are longtime members of MCFGA, and we've gotten all sorts of plants from them - eucalyptus, dahlias, lisianthus, etc. They're great supporters of the whole ecosystem here, I think they sell at eight or nine local farmers markets, and their son Lee has just started farming on another farm in Montgomery County.

We've gotten hellebore seedlings from Pine Knot down in North Carolina (<http://www.pineknotfarms.com>) that have been amazing, and hellebore divisions from Barry Glick at Sunshine Farm and Gardens in West Virginia (<http://sunfarm.com>) that have also done very well.

We got Kordes roses from Northland Rosarium out near you in Spokane - well, relatively near, anyway (<https://www.northlandrosarium.com>). We get a lot of our seeds from Johnny's, and a few that Johnny's doesn't carry from Harris Seeds, Park Seeds, and Eden Brothers.

Help

So many people have helped us! Both of our parents have performed all kinds of hard labor on the farm, from planting to brush clearing to my pyromaniac mom's favorite task of burning it all in an amazing conflagration. Debra we almost gave you an axe or a chainsaw today because we're so used to having help when people come. Cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings, friends have all chipped in to not only make the farm work, but have even bought us given us plants.

Our friends Kate and Bart built the barn while Kate was pregnant with Ella, which means it had to be four and a half years ago, "Hey come stay with us for a weekend, it'll be fun!" Uncle Dave redid most of the inside of the house when we bought it and built our lovely porch when Danny was born.

As I mentioned before, we get agricultural help from friends in the MCFGA, Chris Wien comes to mind- he's retired from Cornell, but keeps his hand in it by giving presentations and advice and consult for farmers in the group. He's lived all over the world doing this stuff and having him as a resource is amazing.

Learning

Lina and I both love learning new things. Books are a big source of inspiration to us, including your books! When we first bought the farm, we didn't really know what we were doing, or what we were going to do. Benefiting from the wisdom of people who've thought about it for long enough to write fifty thousand words on the topic and to take a bunch of beautiful pictures is amazing.

Lisa Mason Ziegler's cool flowers got us started with overwintering flowers. Every new technique we learn, we need to adapt for our local conditions. We tried pretty much all of the flowers that she overwinters just a couple hours south of us, and not all of them worked here, our climate is just enough different.

I think our very first flower farming book was Lynn Buczynski's *The Flower Farmer*, and it's still one we refer back to. You can see we have a shelf full of them.

We also take classes and learn in person whenever we can. Anne Arundel Community College has a great series of floral design classes that I took several years ago. In terms of learning the basics of the craft of floral design, there was nothing like it. I have taken a few Ikebana classes with Tomoko Steen, and while it hasn't infused my style it has very much infused my practice. FutureHarvest CASA was another that nudged us along the way.

Process

We are growing more and more perennials. Perennials are what puts the slow in slow flowers, because sometimes it's three or four years until we're getting a harvest. But it's an amazing way to grow, and I would bet that in ten years we'll be growing mostly them.

Of course, I say perennials like growing a rose and growing a peony and growing a hellebore have quite a lot in common, and I suppose they do. Put a plant in a hole and make sure it gets enough water and nutrients, right? I took this great online class from Paul Zimmerman who is an amazing advocate for growing roses without chemicals, and in his ideal method you spend six months on the soil before you even dig a hole.

It's hard to remember we're not in a rush, but perennials help. My favorite are the peonies, I think, though the hellebores make a run for it in March when they're the first flower blooming. Of course those heirloom narcissus, the lilacs, the hydrangea we sent for your AIFD presentation. Perennials are where it's at!

In terms of the process for planting annuals, it's more time intensive, and we're still learning about it all the time. You can see we plant in long rows that are separated by grass paths. It's

not the first method we tried, but we've stuck with it for a few seasons now, and we like it. When I was talking about books earlier I mentioned *The Flower Farmer*, and I think we tried this method in part because it's what's pictured on the front of that book.

Our soil is sandy, acidic, and compacted. The pasture was a baseball field, and this is where everyone parked and drank and watched the ball games.

In terms of soil preparation, our generally starts with a soil test, which generally tells us to add lime. Both due to the acidity of the soil and the calcium, so we do that. It's interesting, we've also started to be able to notice when there's soil acidity by what weeds grow. Sheep sorrel loves the acid soil, and when that's the weed, it's time for a little more lime.

The sandy soil requires a lot of amending, to get the organic matter boosted. Cover crops are step one, we just cut down the last of them, but you can see that when we tilled in the cover crop for the snapdragons we didn't get everything, that's some rye peeking out which our favorite winter cover crop. The cover crops actually both boost the soil and suppress weeds.

We mow the cover crop with a mulching lawnmower, till again, and depending upon the soil test, probably add in more organic matter and maybe some worm castings.

Bear in mind that for the annuals, we're constantly rebuilding the soil this way, whereas for the perennials, it's a different story. The perennial soil is only ever amended by top dressing with compost and mulch, and that's worked very well for us. Of course, back there with the hellebores, the trees do most of that work for us, which is very nice of them. I've always liked trees.

So back to the system.

Once the soil is ready for planting, the main thing we need to do next is to plant a healthy plant in it that has a good head start on the weeds. Maryland is an amazing place to grow things. Including weeds! The climate is perfect for it, and our main way of keeping ahead of the weeds is to outsmart them.

Just between you and me, I do actually like weeding by hand, but I like it in a three or four hours a week kind of way, not in a fifty or sixty hours a week way.

We put the healthy plant into the well prepared soil, and we keep close tabs on it. We'll touch up the soil fertility with fish emulsion or compost tea, but generally if a plant isn't thriving right off the bat, we haven't done as well with the soil as we'd hoped.

We plant our annuals in four main waves. In the fall, we get our cool flowers in the ground, which are our first ones to bloom in the spring. Then, smack in the middle of winter, we seed the long-season annuals that won't overwinter but that we just love. Silver Drop eucalyptus is really

a favorite. We've overwintered it once, but generally we have to start it in February and start picking in August or so.

By March, we're starting spring plants that are going to be planted out before our last frost, spring delicates and succession plantings of those cool flowers.

April, May, and June are hot summer flowers. All our dahlias, gladiolas, zinnias, celosia, gomphrena, cosmos, marigolds, you name it. And then in the middle of the summer we seed our biennials, those are just starting back under the grow lights now.

I'll add that in addition to this, there are a few flowers that just keep succession planting all summer long.

Off Farm

One of the things I think I'd like to offer for people who are thinking about farming, is that you definitely should do it. And you definitely should do it while you have other income.

That's the normal way to farm in this country, and we need to talk about it more, to destigmatize it. The overwhelming majority of farms also benefit from off-farm income, and if you're doing that, it doesn't mean you're not a real farmer. It means you're doing it just right!