

4-1117

— ISSUE No. 4 —

# Slow Flowers JOURNAL

American-Grown Heroes

51

Southern Heritage

55

The Forager-Florist

57

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# AMERICAN-GROWN HEROES

Southern Flower Hubs

By Debra Prinzing

Increasingly, flower farmers, farmer-florists and designers are forming unique alliances for commerce, marketing and even advocacy. The net benefit means more local flowers available to more consumers.

I'm calling these micro-regional groups "Flower Hubs," which in some ways is disrupting conventional wholesale channels and in other ways, working in tandem with them. While the shift is subtle, more conventional wholesale florists are designating a "local" or "American-grown" section of their sales floor -- and I believe this is in response to requests from floral customers.

And yet, it's still often hard for florists to get their hands on locally-grown flowers and just as challenging for farmers to connect with floral customers, designers and retailers. In the South, we've identified five dynamic flower co-operatives and collectives, including one local flower hub with a physical location open only to florists. These groups are primarily farmer-driven, and rely on creativity, an awareness of what their market wants, and a willingness to partner with erstwhile competitors to create a "rising tide" effect.

Read about what's happening in some Southern Hubs and in the future, I'll report on similar groups in other regions.



## NEW ORLEANS (NOLA) FLOWER COLLECTIVE

nolaflowercollective.com, @nolaflowercollective

**Founded:** 2013

**Members:** Four farms, including members who sell wholesale to local florists, via farmers' markets and to their own wedding/event clients.

**About:** A resource-sharing network of urban flower farms endeavoring to revive the local flower culture in New Orleans

**Main activities:** NOLA Flower Collective maintains a web site that introduces member farms to the public and to potential floral customers. The group also hosts an annual Mother's Day Pop Up Flower Shop & Brunch where customers can purchase and arrange locally-grown flowers. Coffee and bunch vendors are on hand and there are kids activities to encourage multi-generational participation. The group uses the event to raise awareness and generate interest in New Orleans-grown flowers, explains **Denise Richter**, partner in **Pistil & Stamen Flower Farm and Studio**. "This is a true alternative to the conventional floral industry. We make it fun, we make it engaging, we make it beautiful and we teach about where your flowers come from."

Twice annually, members combine resources to order plant starts (plugs) or bulbs. "We realized that the most effective and productive thing we can do for each other is to purchase cooperatively to meet wholesale minimums," she adds. "Basically, we leverage what suppliers will do for us."

**New:** With a floral renaissance taking place in New Orleans, it's inevitable that new people are exploring urban flower farming. The NOLA Flower Collective recently hosted a workshop to share "best practices" with newer farmers. "We want to share is that the market is big enough for everyone, but that locally-grown flowers have to be high quality and harvested correctly," Denise explains. "As seasoned growers who are already cooperating with each other, we feel it's our responsibility to encourage and educate new flower farmers."

## PIEDMONT WHOLESALE FLOWERS

piedmontwholesaleflowers.com

@piedmontwholesaleflowers

**Founded:** 2017, with ongoing support from RAFI (Rural Advancement Fund International).

**Members:** Ten farms serving North Carolina's Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill markets

**Customers:** Piedmont Wholesale Flowers maintains a customer list of 150 florists and wholesale buyers. There is a \$25 annual buyer's pass.

**About:** A cooperative venture connecting local growers and wholesale buyers. Members raise the freshest flowers on small farms around central North Carolina. Together they supply a reliable source of seasonal stems that showcase the beauty and abundance of the region. The market is open 8-10 a.m. every Thursday to buyers' pass holders.

**Main activities:** Piedmont Wholesale Flowers began in



NOLA Flower Collective

March 2017 stocking local ranunculus and other early bulb crops. The grand opening took place in conjunction with Mother's Day. According to co-founder **Kelly Morrison**, owner of **Color Fields** in Hillsborough, N.C., the idea to start a local wholesale hub originated with the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market, a successful cooperative in the Pacific Northwest. "The idea stuck with me. Why are flower farmers driving all over town delivering individual flower orders to all the same florists and burning gas and time that would be better spent growing more flowers?"

She knew the demand for garden-style floral design was growing but she also knew of florists who weren't familiar with buying direct from flowers. The goal -- to get more sustainably-raised, local flowers into more hands -- inspired Kelly and others to start Piedmont Wholesale Flowers. The group is being incubated by a like-minded food hub called **Bull City Cool**. Initial grant funding has paid for a web site and other marketing. Farmers pay a "stall fee" to the co-operative and handle their own sales.

**New:** The plan for 2018 is to consolidate all sales through the co-op with farms paying a percentage of flower sales in exchange for having staff handle the transaction. Piedmont does not offer public hours, but due to local interest, the farmers experimented in September with "Brunch and Bouquets," an afternoon event with refreshments and a DIY Flower Bar, charging \$40 to the public.





## WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA (WNC) FLOWER FARMERS

wncflowers.com, @wncflowerfarmers

**Founded:** 2017

**Members:** 14 farms

**About:** An Asheville, N.C.-area resource for floral designers, event planners, wholesalers, florists and brides. The new web site has a dedicated page for each member flower farm; customers are encouraged to contact farms directly to order fresh blooms. There is a password-protected availability list for florists' use in planning and placing pre-orders.

**Main activities:** In addition to promoting themselves to the floral marketplace as a collective of new and seasoned flower farmers in the Asheville area, **WNC Flower Farmers** recently started a wholesale program with the Mayesh branch in Charlotte, N.C., located two hours away.

Early in the year, **Emily Patrick**, owner of **Carolina Flowers** of Marshall, N.C., reached out to Mayesh to inquire about creating a wholesale partnership. She and a few fellow growers met with **Todd Smith**, **Mayesh-Charlotte's** general manager, and came up with a dahlia program that ran successfully this past summer, involving several WNC Flower Farmers members.

"That's not a market that any of us would be able to tackle on our own," Emily says. "It works because Mayesh sends a delivery truck to Asheville each week that would otherwise go back to Charlotte empty. We said, 'we can fill that truck.'"

Being able to move higher volumes on a consistent basis through this wholesale partnership has its advantages, she explains. The wholesale delivery happens early in the week (Tuesday or Wednesday), so farms that harvest flowers on Monday for the Mayesh program are still able to harvest on Thursday for local sales, especially for weddings.

**New:** Emily says she hopes to see the program expand to include other crops in the future, such as foxgloves and sweet

peas, "and anything else where local growers are able to offer the freshest, on-trend crop -- and that's most things if you ask me!"



## SC UPSTATE FLOWER GROWERS

scupstateflowers.com, @scupstateflowers

**Founded:** 2016

**Members:** Nine farms growing flowers in upstate South Carolina, in and around Greenville.

**About:** A community of experienced and emerging flower growers dedicated to bringing the freshest, locally-grown flowers to South Carolina's upstate region.

**Main activities:** The **SC Upstate** group markets its floral availability list on a weekly basis via email to a growing list of wedding and event designers. The customer list has grown to 40 designers in 2017, up from just five last year. Sales begin in March with anemones and other early-spring crops, continuing through Thanksgiving with specialty mums.

The group has hosted two farmer-florist parties around American Flowers Week, inviting designers to meet local flower farmers, enjoy refreshments and have a chance to create arrangements with seasonal blooms. In addition, a few public events at farmers' markets and grocery stores help promote locally-grown flowers to consumers. Events like these have stimulated new business, especially from event florists, says co-founder **Melissa Smith** of **Fraylick Farm** of Travelers Rest, S.C.

Wedding and event customers have been enthusiastic about buying from flower farmers in their region, she says. Yet, it has been a challenge to connect with retail florists in the area, mainly because of delivery schedules. "I think that until we can either establish our own (physical) market or acquire a nice delivery truck with someone who can run a route



to retailers, we just have to work with the systems we already have.”

The good news is that “event florists go to great lengths to procure the product they want and their needs are specific,” Melissa continues. “They’re looking for unique, which is why they have latched onto local a lot faster. A lot of our farms specialize in hard to ship flowers.”

**New:** A few of the SC Upstate farm members are working with a Greenville-based wholesale florist to supply local flowers in 2018. “The wholesaler actually came to us first, and we’re looking forward to working with them.”

### LOWCOUNTRY FLOWER GROWERS

lowcountryflowergrowers.com, @lowcountryflowergrowers

**Founded:** 2017

**Members:** Nine member farms based in and around Charleston, S.C. and encompassing the South Carolina coastal region.

**About:** Lowcountry Flower Growers is a coalition of coastal South Carolina flower farmers committed to growing local, sustainable botanicals for florists and designers in their community. According to the web site: “Backyard gardeners have known for centuries that South Carolina soil is a rich producer of flowers, yet the south has only recently awakened to the possibilities of the commercial potential of flowers. In 2017, seven Lowcountry flower farmers met to discuss their commitment to producing beautiful, high-quality floral crops for coastal South Carolina. They knew that locally-grown produce, prized for its exceptional flavor and quality, is a vital part of the Lowcountry economy. The farmers agreed to work together to set the same high standards for the locally-grown bouquet gracing your table.”

**Main activities:** The group formed earlier this year and held its first public event at the **Marion Square Farmers Market** in downtown Charleston in conjunction with **American Flowers Week** (June 28-July 4, 2017). The farmers showcased zinnias as a familiar farmers’ market annual used in contemporary floral arrangements, and gave out field-grown zinnias tied with the Lowcountry Flower Growers’ business card to shoppers.

Currently, Lowcountry’s weekly availability list is posted online and sent to about 20 florists in the Charleston area. **Laura Mewbourn** of **Feast & Flora Farm**, based in Meggett, S.C., says the collective’s mission has three components: “Educating the public and local floral designers, serving as a network to support one another and share resources, and marketing our flowers to floral designers,” she says. ■

