

# SLOW FLOWERS

*Journal*

CELEBRATING THE SEASON | FALL 2022



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**SLOW FLOWERS HEROES** BY DEBRA PRINZING  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANN NGUYEN

## joan thorndike.

le mera gardens | talent. oregon

In 2012, with the publication of *The 50 Mile Bouquet*, readers met Joan Thorndike, a gifted flower-farmer based in Oregon's agriculturally rich Rogue Valley. I featured her in a chapter called "Grower Wisdom," and introduced Le Mera Gardens, one of the state's first certified organic flower farms.

Le Mera Gardens grows about 150 seasonal, specialty cut flowers and botanical varieties sold in bulk to florists, DIY weddings and special events, private clients, restaurants, hospitality venues, and local charities in southwest Oregon and northern California. Despite demand for it, Le Mera Gardens does not ship flowers, reflecting Slow Flowers' value of a small transportation footprint.

The agricultural enterprise spreads across a number of urban parcels in southwest Oregon, from Medford to Ashland, with a propagation house, 12 hoop houses, a double-shade house for hydrangeas, and approximately five acres of open fields. With increasingly hot summers and too many seasons of watching their plants burn, Joan says in all seriousness that she and Steve and Suzi Fry, owners of parent farm Fry Family Farm, dream of shading their open fields to stay in business.

### "There's something wonderful about florists."

Over the decades, selling wholesale flowers to area florists remains Le Mera Gardens' top priority -- representing at least 50 percent of annual sales. "I've always sold to florists from the very beginning; they are my primary buyers," Joan explains. "There's something really wonderful about working with florists. They are my very best teachers. About 10 years ago, there was a lot of talk about (retail) florists closing and going out of business, but that hasn't been our experience. One or two of my customers have changed ownership, but the flower shops are still there, and even a new one has emerged."

### ADVICE FROM A FLOWER FARMER

#### GROW LOTS OF FLOWERS

: "In order for me to offer more diversity and better flowers, I need to grow more of them," Joan says. "I learned through the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG) that seeds are cheap compared to everything else, and that abundance pays off. Growing abundance demands I constantly look for new markets and ways to sell the very best of my flowers."

#### VALUE ORGANIC

Le Mera Garden's tagline is "Oregon's Organic Flower Farm," which prompts conversations with clients. Joan welcomes them, explaining, "The question is not whether you eat my flowers. Rather, it's whether I can have my children and your children and my workers and myself out in the field if it's not organically managed, if we don't follow practices that feel safe. Do I want you to handle a flower or bury your nose in a bunch of flowers that I know is covered in pesticides? No, I don't want that. It was very, very clear to me I should be an organic grower."

#### STUDY THE EXPERTS

It launched me to be a disciplined grower, and to realize I owe it to other growers to maintain the highest quality in my flowers. I became a member of the ASCFG 30 years ago, and I'm still learning. The other book was *Flowers, Flowers!*, by Paula Pryke. This incredible book is all about flower abundance and diversity by color -- the yellows and golds in one chapter; the reds and pinks in another. When I saw this book, I was 30 years old, and I felt, "This is what I want. I want people to understand that flowers are so diverse; that they have a birth, a flourishing, a senescence." I wanted people to really love flowers, and it inspired me to grow as many varieties as possible to get into people's hands."

#### LEARN MORE

[lemeraflowerfarm.com](http://lemeraflowerfarm.com)  
[@lemeragardens](https://www.instagram.com/lemeragardens)



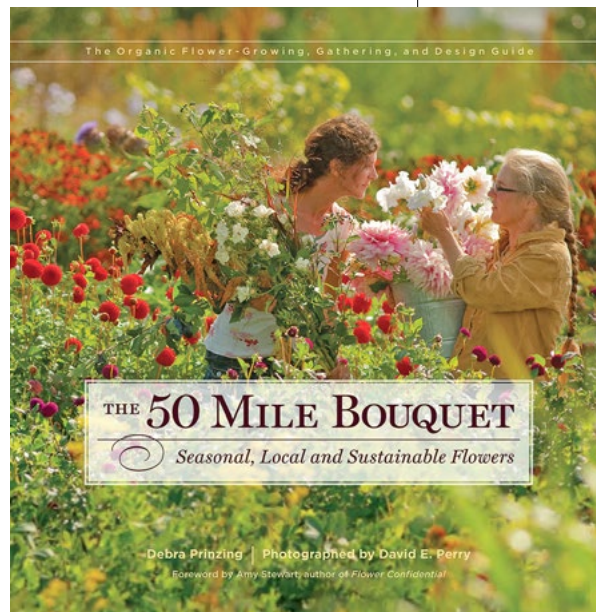
## SLOW FLOWERS HEROES

What has changed over the years are florists coming to Le Mera Gardens from further afield – from communities like Klamath Falls, Oregon, and Mt. Shasta, California. Also, more recently, studio designers are becoming a significant share of business, as are farmer-florists who treat Le Mera Gardens as their "backup farm." Joan values new additions to her customer base, a sign that locally grown and seasonal flowers are loved and established in her community.

Joan texts and emails her core customers each week, in addition to maintaining her website's harvest and availability calendar, which aids in their ordering. She recently upgraded Le Mera Gardens' website and plans to spend this coming off-season to build an online wholesale shop. In addition to her primary wholesale channels (farm-to-florist), Joan has always sold direct to consumers, primarily DIY flower lovers. She consciously differentiates each channel through pricing and product offerings. The farm also produces huge quantities of mixed bouquets sold at area farmers' markets, locally owned or managed grocery stores, Portland-based New Seasons Market, and at the Fry Family Farm Store. All direct-to-consumer retail bouquets are labeled Fry Family Farm.

After decades operating Le Mera Gardens out of a refrigerated box truck as a mobile flower shop for florists and DIY clients, things changed dramatically in 2020. "When COVID came, I couldn't figure out how to place a customer and myself in my truck's small enclosed space, no matter how many masks and hand sanitizer we had. It was impractical," Joan says.

"As of 2020, I set up a 'flower market' inside our farm's warehouse. Every Tuesday and Thursday during our long growing season, I welcome florists, designers, farmer-florists, wedding and event DIY clients, and the community to shop from the market, by appointment. Several of our florists prefer placing weekly orders and have their drivers pick up flowers. Watching how carefully and deftly drivers handle sometimes unwieldy buckets of flowers, greens, and grasses has taught me how very important drivers are to their flower shops. I rather think they enjoy witnessing the "guts" of our farm, and I know they love the



treats we send back to the shop with them – in-season fruits and vegetables from Fry Family Farm, and sometimes even a fresh pie from our farm's commercial kitchen."

The DIY program appeals to destination-wedding couples who are attracted by the Rogue Valley's proliferation of wineries, ranches, farms, and other romantic venues, not to mention the region's natural beauty and Ashland's famous theatres. Many embrace the unique character of place by choosing locally grown flowers for their nuptials. When they contact Le Mera Gardens, Joan encourages them to reference her seasonal flower availability calendar for planning. She asks them to "paint a picture" for her of their dream wedding, to describe quantities and state a budget, guiding them through their choices.

"It used to be that people would give me a mile-long list and ask if a \$200 budget was enough! But now, it's rare that people don't get it, which tells me two things: There is a much greater appreciation of fresh flowers now, and people appreciate the value of floral diversity that we grow. People who come to us already have mentally made the choice that they want the diversity of seasonal flowers grown on a local farm." Joan sees this positive shift as tangible measures of success for the Slow Flowers Movement.

### THE 50 MILE BOUQUET

*Seasonal, Local and Sustainable Flowers*  
2012, St. Lynn's Press

By Debra Prinzing | Photography by David E. Perry  
Foreword by Amy Stewart, author of *Flower Confidential*

When it was published in 2012, *The 50 Mile Bouquet* was the first book to spotlight a major cultural shift and a transformation around how cut-flowers are grown, designed and consumed, closely mirroring the culinary world's locavore/slow food revolution. One decade ago, the floral industry was just beginning to ask for changes, seeking alternatives to imported, mass-produced and chemical-laden flowers. *The 50 Mile Bouquet* introduced some of the innovative voices of the dynamic new Slow Flower Movement: the organic flower-farmers, the sustainably motivated floral designers . . . and the flower enthusiasts who were increasingly asking, "Where and how were my flowers grown, and who grew them?" The Book's documentary-feature reporting and photography takes readers into the farms and design studios of Slow Flowers practitioners. Its relevance today is more important than ever, considering issues around climate change, supply-chain limitations, and equity in the marketplace.