

# Putting Down Roots

In the heart of Pittsburgh, greenSinner reconnects flower farming with floral design.

Photography by Kat Akers, Requiem Images  
Details: greenSinner: greensinner.com, @greensinner, @greensinnerunfiltered

**J**immy Lohr and Jonathan Weber, owners of the **greenSinner** floral studio, grow their own flowers in the heart of Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood.

The men are modern-day "gentlemen farmers" who balance wedding and event design with a small-scale, but ambitious growing operation. Jimmy's title is CEO (Chief Eccentric Officer) and Jonathan, a marketing consultant by day, moonlights as "Farmer-General."

For the past several years they've tended to a postage-stamp-sized cutting garden (estimated at one-tenth of an acre), which is wrapped around two sides of their urban studio. In 2015 they also acquired a six-acre parcel within the Pittsburgh city limits, now called **Midsummer Hill Farm**.

"Since our beginnings, we've focused on locally grown flowers and sustainable practices, including wanting our very own urban micro-farm," Jonathan says. "We have a greenhouse and flower beds covering every inch of this property. We currently grow about a third of the flowers we use for weddings and all of our flower CSAs."

The studio is actually two commercial buildings, now connected, that add up to about 1,000-square-feet, plus basement storage and an 80-square-foot walk-in cooler. Even though their lot is small, greenSinner grows approximately 10,000 stems each season, with about 50 percent dahlias and the balance

in annuals, perennials and vines. The urban flower farm gives greenSinner a number of competitive and creative advantages, Jimmy and Jonathan maintain.

"The cutting garden pretty much supports our weekly CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program, which we offer clients in the summer," Jimmy says. "And the CSA gives us an opportunity to play with fun color palettes while getting local flowers into people's hands. We have landed so many weddings because of that CSA."

They added Midsummer Hill Farm with the long-term goal of planting ornamental shrubs and high-value perennials like peonies. "Right now, it's a partially wooded hillside, but with a lot of sweat, seeds and weed-pulling, it will eventually become a flower farm that will supply more of our flowers," Jonathan explains. "We're committed to sustainability, and sourcing agricultural products locally is a big part of that. Flowers are a perfect crop for urban agriculture, since we don't need to worry so much about soil contamination, like we would for food."

Both pieces of property provide surprising sources of design ideas, Jimmy continues. "I found inspiration in the color of the raspberry bushes in the cutting garden – the reddish-orange color was perfect for a wedding in February. It's amazing finding natural inspiration here that we'll never find with something that comes off of a delivery truck." The forested portion of



(Clockwise from top left)  
Jimmy Lohr, Chief Eccentric Officer  
Jonathan Weber, "Farmer General".  
greenSinner entry sign.



greenSinner's team includes (from left): Jonathan Weber, Laura Lee Burkhardt, Jimmy Lohr, Laura Cramer and (back) Rose Kocher

Midsummer Hill Farm is a forager's playground with saplings, branches and wild grapevine ready to harvest for larger installations.

Jonathan believes having their own flower farm is one way to keep greenSinner true to its sustainability mission. "Florists need to understand plants and how they grow – I think it's really important." Given the growth of greenSinner, which serviced approximately 120 weddings and events in 2017, it's hard for the business to produce enough flowers to keep pace with demand. For now, the studio relies on local flower farms in western Pennsylvania, sources from larger growers in California and Ontario, Canada, and estimates about one-third of its floral product is conventionally sourced, including imported flowers.

Like most florists, greenSinner's favorite clients are those who say, "Jimmy, do your thing," the CEO says. "The most magic happens when clients don't know what they want; they appreciate our aesthetic and the designs we do, and the fact that we focus on sustainably grown flowers. We really sell ambiance and experience, memories and love. Getting the feeling right is more important and it's less about the right color of rose."

With the Pittsburgh studio surrounded by lush vegetation and rows of flowers that spill into the adjacent parking lot and onto the sidewalk, potential couples arrive for consultations cu-

rious about what they'll find inside. There, an entire wall filled with bookshelves holding interior design, landscape history and art references, as well as floral design books, makes greenSinner a place where clients are encouraged to unplug from their Smartphone and Pinterest boards and instead page through picture books. "Part of what we do is just give clients the opportunity to show us what speaks to them without necessarily having the vocabulary to describe it," Jonathan says.

Many of greenSinner's brainstormers are concepts that have yet to be produced, like "tree-zebo" that the men wanted to propose to wedding clients. Staff member **Laura Lee Burkhardt** sketches such concepts to give clients a visual representation of whatever big idea Jimmy conjures in his imagination.

"It's been really valuable for us – and our clients," Jonathan says. "In addition to focusing on our space this year, we've really built a great team. **Rose Kocher**, our lead designer, has been with us for six years; we've added **Laura Lee** as additional designer and artist; and **Laura Cramer** has whipped our processes into shape to make sure we give everyone great customer service."

greenSinner began in 2011 as a plant and flower nursery with a stall at the Pittsburgh Public Market. Then, Jimmy took a few floral design courses from Pittsburgh area instructor **Cindy Miller** who encouraged him to continue designing. That led to



(Clockwise from top left) Fanciful and embellished with a glass mosaic facade, greenSinner's Pittsburgh studio recently served as a backdrop for clients' wedding photography; a greenSinner bouquet; an al fresco wedding supper in greenSinner's urban cutting garden.

running the plant and floral department for a local grocery store, experimenting with a number of retail models, such as pop-ups, fairs and opening their studio to retail customers a few days a week.

By 2017, however, greenSinner simplified its mission to focus on two things: Designing weddings and events and growing flowers. "We want to grow varieties and colors that we can't source from our local network of farms," Jimmy explains.

Jonathan likens greenSinner's focus on flower farming to technology giant Apple, saying, "it's the whole vertical integration thing – we control the hardware and the software." ■