In its fourth year, American Flowers Week celebrates U.S.-grown (and foraged) botanicals with five fresh, inspiring and handcrafted couture looks.
Against the backdrop of the October 2017 Tubbs Fire that decimated large areas of Northern California’s wine country, Dahlia farmer Kate Rowe, of Aztec Dahlias in Petaluma, Calif., and farmer-horticulturist Hedda Brorstrom, of Full Bloom Farm in Sebastopol, began a loving homage to Dahlias for American Flowers Week.

This story takes place at Aztec Dahlias, located just minutes from the local airport where a constant stream of fire-fighting helicopters took off and landed, lending noise and stirring up dust. According to both women, the decision to not cancel the photo shoot was a defiant act against the fires.

“It was the best thing that we could have possibly done. Even though it was a crazy time and smoke and ash filled the air,” Hedda says. With a motivation to “make it work,” despite the constant threat of being evacuated or worse, Kate and her business partner, Omar Duran, wanted to showcase Aztec Dahlias’ flowers and support the American Flowers Week botanical fashion shoot.

“We pride ourselves on having the largest selection of high-quality Dahlias you can purchase in our area, so this project was a great way to share our flowers for something wonderful. Even with the fires, the timing was perfect. We had this abundance in the fields, and the idea of making a dress out of them was so much fun,” Kate says.

The farm donated more than 350 stems to Hedda and a small team of volunteers who adorned the extraordinary skirt from waist to hem in a vibrant gradient of flowers. At the time, the farmers were close to wrapping up their season growing Dahlias as cut flowers, tubers and plants. Last year, Aztec Dahlias grew 5,200 plants, representing more than 400 varieties of Dahlias. This year, Kate has bumped the total to 7,800 Dahlias for cutting, with plans to sell most flowers direct to florists for the Dahlia year. Kate has bumped the total to 7,800 Dahlias representing more than 400 varieties of flowers, tubers and plants. Last year, Aztec Dahlias grew 5,200 plants, representing more than 400 varieties of Dahlias. This year, Kate has bumped the total to 7,800 Dahlias for cutting, with plans to sell most flowers direct to florists.

Rather than photographing in Aztec Dahlias’ fields where the dress might have disappeared against rows of flowers, Hedda and photographer Becca Henry chose a rustic barn as the iconic agricultural backdrop to silhouette model and dress. According to Kate, the barn is owned by her landlords and has “been in support of a flower farm for a very long time, since Neve Bros. Roses used to own it.” Both Kate and Hedda say they were deeply moved by the visceral response to flowers from people in their community who were threatened by the wildfires. “We decided that week of the fire that it felt kind of insane to be in business selling flowers, so we gave away everything we grew,” Kate says. “At a core level, we learned how important the role flowers play in people’s lives.”

The Dahlia dress symbolizes creativity, collaboration and a celebration of community, Hedda adds. “There’s this profound intimacy that you experience seeing an image of someone wearing an outfit made of plants.” Hedda says, “We don’t often interact with wild lands because we’re so detached from nature. This project helps call that relationship into question and reminds us that we’re not separate from nature but part of nature.”

The Allure of Dahlias

Appeal of Dahlias burns bright against Tubbs Fire background.

of Dahlias

The Allure

against Tubbs Fire background.