

Q & A

How I Do It: Q&A with Melanie Harrington

Farm provides local, seasonal, Ontario-grown flowers in an Internet age.

Who: Melanie Harrington, owner and designer

What: Dahlia May Flower Farm

Where: Trenton, Ontario, Canada

Social Media: dahliamayflowerfarm.com, @dahliamayflowerfarm

About: Opening a permanent retail shop on the flower farm she runs with her husband, Ontario-based **Melanie Harrington** is a young entrepreneur who has dramatically changed how she provides cut flowers to her customers and how shoppers engage with the source of their bouquets and blooms. A native of the Quinte area and a lover of nature, Melanie brings to her work a background in art and horticulture, as well as a passion for growing beautiful flowers. She completed her studies in horticulture and floral design at Loyalist College and she has taken a course in flower farming and design at Floret.

Square Footage: Wedding and event design work is based in a studio at Dahlia May's century-old farmstead, but it is not open to the retail public. In 2016, Melanie added a charming, barn-red, 9-by-12-foot flower stand called **Dahlia May Flower Market**. It operates Friday through Sunday, February through December.

Services/Specialties: The Flower Market sells only Ontario-grown flowers, the majority of which are grown at Dahlia May Flower Farm, including cut flowers, designed bouquets, single stems and seasonal vegetable seedlings. We try to have lots of buckets of single stems and we normally stock \$30 mixed bouquets and \$45 hand-tied bouquets. I've been trying to make our flowers accessible because not everyone can spend \$50 at a flower shop every week. When we're able to throw a flash sale on tulips at \$10 per bunch, many more people can enjoy those flowers.

What Inspired the Flower Market? While we sell at a local farmers' market from May to October, I knew we needed to expand. There are so many things you can't control at the farmers' market, so I thought, "what can we do to control the customer experience?" The only thing that we can do is bring the customer to us. We're giving them a flower shop experience. We take credit cards, so people can pay electronically. We offer full service, so it's always staffed.

How Do You Merchandise? I was inspired by traveling in Europe and seeing sweet little market stalls and corner stands with wooden crates and simple, beautiful displays. People who come to the farm enter a tiny room and they're surrounded by buckets of gorgeous flowers. It kind of breaks down the barriers that are sometimes found at traditional flower shops, where everything is kept behind glass and you have to ask permission to go into the cooler.



Floral designer Melanie Harrington

Off-season Sourcing: In February, we source blooms from other Ontario growers to give customers an option for buying locally grown, non-imported flowers at Valentine's Day.

Best Off-season Flowers: In November and December, we run an old-fashioned Christmas market, harvesting our own evergreen boughs, dogwood and birch branches. We provide customers with the ingredients they can use to decorate their own planters and we also offer pre-made outdoor planters, handmade wreaths and fresh-cut Christmas trees. We also supply a large stock of potted amaryllis and paper whites.

How We Market: We're located two hours east of Toronto, 2.5 hours west of Ottawa and about 10 minutes outside Trenton, which has a population of 50,000. We are off the beaten track. At this point, customers are shopping directly from our Instagram feed. They know we'll be posting what's available. In the last six months, I've learned to use Instagram stories to connect with customers, showing short videos and sneak peeks of what's for sale at the Flower Market. It really creates a bit of hype and excitement for customers. We even do previews and say: "Just for you who are watching Instagram stories, you can come tonight for the flash sale and beat the



(Above) Just-harvested summer favorites from Dahlia May Flower Farm include cosmos, zinnia and, of course, dahlias.

(Below) The Dahlia May Flower Market offers full-service retail flowers to farm visitors on a weekly basis.



open hours that start tomorrow." We've had customers jumping in their cars, driving an hour to the Flower Market at 9 p.m., taking selfies here, and posting (images of) their hauls about getting the inside deal. Now, if customers type the hash tag #dahliamayflowermarket, they'll find what's available every week through the season.

Advice for Others: Include customers in your story. I started out simply with plans to grow our own flowers, but that idea has turned into me running a flower shop. It's so rewarding to bring customers to the farm where they can actually see how things are grown. During Mother's Day, for example, shoppers saw tulips physically growing in all of the beds here at the farm; they walked through the greenhouses and saw more tulips growing there. That gives customers one more point of connection, meeting a real person who grows a real flower. It helps them value our flowers and know they're special. ■



(Above) Springtime narcissus, ranunculus and tulips are a major seasonal draw for area flower lovers.

(Below) Melanie Harrington and Alex Ferri live, farm and sell flowers at Dahlia May Flower Farm in Ontario. *Photography © Ashley Slessor*

