

Perennial Favorite

For 30 years, the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers has delivered fresh, local and seasonal blooms to florists and designers.

Farmer-florist Lennie Larkin of B-Side Farm in Sebastopol, Calif., grows and designs seasonal flowers. She is also an ASCFG director.

Slow Flowers JOURNAL

BY DEBRA PRINZING
PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASCFG
LENNIE LARKIN AND CAROLYN SNELL

In 1988, when the **Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG)** was founded, most flower farmers communicated in decidedly low-tech ways. **Janet Foss**, of **J. Foss Garden Flowers** in Chehalis, Wash., recalls eagerly awaiting the arrival of her favorite seed catalog by mail. There were no photographs, just enticing descriptions to help her choose which flower seeds to plant each season. “I couldn’t go on the Internet and ask for advice,” she recalls.

Fast-forward 30 years and today, the ASCFG boasts a diverse membership of flower farmers, farmer-florists, designers, educators and growers based primarily in the U.S. and Canada. These high-tech agricultural entrepreneurs use digital tools and social media platforms to learn, communicate and market their crops. The term “specialty cut flowers” is now equated with “couture,” “artisan” and “uncommon” – floral adjectives that describe the trending garden-inspired aesthetic.

The ASCFG is a critical hub for anyone involved in growing flowers commercially. The organization publishes *The Cut Flower Quarterly*; offers educational scholarships; awards research grants to both growers and floriculture academics; conducts seed, perennial, woody plant and bulb trials; coordinates a popular mentor program; and educates farmers on the science and art of growing flowers for market through several meetings held each year across North America.

The transformation from a small grass-roots cohort to the leading professional association for flower farmers was not sudden. It has occurred over three decades during which the U.S. floral industry has weathered dramatic change in domestic consumption. Yes, approximately 80 percent of flowers sold in the U.S. are imported, but ASCFG members are at the heart of a cultural shift as flower sourcing practices change along all points of the distribution channel. According to the USDA’s most recent floriculture census (2012), there has been a 16 percent increase in the number of farms reporting that they grow flowers and foliages on some or all of their land. Also meaningful is a 2013 USDA study that singled out floriculture as the most profitable “value-added” crop (over livestock and nursery plants) for small-acre farms producing less than \$500,000 in annual gross revenue.

“The ASCFG provides opportunities for those who may have started on a small scale to become full-time growers,” Executive Director **Judy Marriott Laushman** says. “Many are implementing season-extension practices that allow them to provide product earlier and later in the year, establishing solid relationships with retail and wholesale buyers looking for a steady supply of local flowers.”

One measure of the ASCFG’s influence is the growth of its ranks. In 2012, when I profiled the association for my book, *The 50 Mile Bouquet*, there were 600 members. Today, there are nearly 1,600 members. The ASCFG’s roots can be traced to a 1987 “Field Grown Cut Flowers” conference hosted by **Dr. Allan**





(Below) Farmer-florist Gretel Adams (center) of Sunny Meadows Flower Farm in Columbus, Ohio, participates in a design workshop at an ASCFG event.

(Left) Outgoing ASCFG President Dave Dowling shares his expertise with attendees at a recent ASCFG Conference and Trade Show.

(Right) Farm tours are one of the most popular features of ASCFG conferences for professional flower farmers; Carolyn Snell is both a flower grower and a wedding and event designer at her farm in Buxton, Maine. She is also an ASCFG director.



Armitage, former horticulture professor at the **University of Georgia** in Athens, and his then-research technician Judy Laushman. More than 160 people attended the first cut flower trials – growers, seed producers, educators and suppliers – from around the country. As Dr. Armitage recalls, “it was a special time because the conference let people who were toiling away in anonymity meet others just like them.”

The following year, 30 people attended the first organizational meeting of the “National Field Cut Flower Growers Association” in Geneva, Ill. According to **Jim Nau**, **Ball Seed Company’s** cultural advisor and corporate historian, who served as the ASCFG’s first elected president, “We felt there was a need for more information on cut flowers, as well as new ideas for growing them.”

Dr. Armitage observes that it was a “pretty bleak time for cut flower growers in America – and I give much credit to people in the ASCFG for keeping [domestic flower farming] alive.” He credits the farmers in the ASCFG for cheering on their peers. “Imagine if you were a grower of cut flowers in

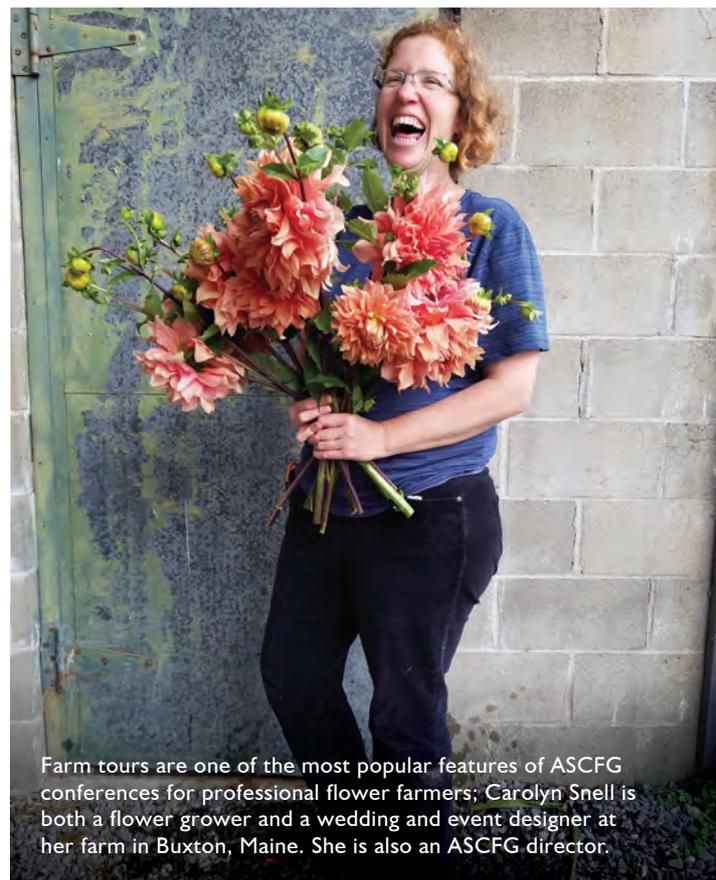
this country in the late 1980s. You were on your own. You did it because you wanted to do it. There wasn’t anyone doing research, but it turned out that we were. Fighting like crazy against imports, of course.”

Between 1987 and 1998, **Lisa Margulies-Chadwick** operated **The Flower Farm** in Arroyo Grande, Calif., growing primarily garden roses for the cut flower trade. When it became clear that she had more premium roses to sell than central California’s florists could purchase, Lisa sought out help to reach a larger market. She joined the ASCFG after reading about its founding in *Florists’ Review*.

“I was way too small, and I didn’t know anything about the wholesale marketplace, so the ASCFG was huge for my learning curve on how to pack, ship and transport my roses to markets beyond my region,” Lisa recalls. “It was such a useful association and a really good experience for me.”

Today, the ASCFG is enjoying a surge of emerging flower farmers eager to join the cut flower renaissance. **Lennie Larkin** of **B-Side Farm**, based in Sebastopol, Calif., is a farmer-florist





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who grows unique blooms and supplies fellow wine-country florists and her own wedding customers from a half-acre parcel, which she leases.

“I’m drawn to special flowers that I can grow myself – rare varieties that I don’t see sold on the mass market or that don’t ship well. The repertoire of what a designer can use is so much broader once they look to a local flower farmer,” Lennie explains. “It can be a bit of a challenge to work with elements you haven’t used before, but it really opens up a new world of possibilities of what you can offer your clients and couples. You can make your designs really distinctive and special and highly seasonal.”

Lennie credits the ASCFG for nurturing her micro farm (which she jokingly calls a large cutting garden). “I realized early on with my involvement in the ASCFG that one of my interests is how we convey information, how we learn and how to best teach that information to others,” she says.

A painter and writer, **Carolyn Snell** grew up on **Snell Family Farms** in Buxton, Maine, and returned to agriculture in 2009, expanding the flower crops that her parents originally raised for farmers’ market customers and starting **Carolyn Snell Designs**, a wedding and event business.

“Joining the ASCFG was a tipping point in terms of being a flower farmer instead of a farmer who grows some flowers,” Carolyn says. “It changed how people perceived me and my flowers. I would have had a lot more error in my trial-and-error without the ASCFG, and I would have felt too isolated.

The connections we have built among other members keeps things exciting for me,” she says.

The ASCFG’s role in the floral industry is more relevant than ever. The renaissance of domestic floral agriculture, the explosion of interest in growing and marketing seasonal crops, the rise of farmer-florists, and the increased availability of cut flower choices for designers have revitalized the design community’s relationship with seasonal and local flowers.

“Florists are seeking growers like me because their customers are seeing images of flowers like sweet peas and poppies, flowers that can’t be imported,” Carolyn says. “I think we’ve all made flowers exciting again.”

Adds Judy, “I’ve been told for years that the ASCFG members are uncommonly generous, sharing their successes and failures without consideration of potential competition. I consider this the key to the longevity of the ASCFG.”

DETAILS

Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers
ascfg.org, @ascfginc

2018 ASCFG Conference & Trade Show

Sept. 24-26, 2018
 Hilton North Raleigh/Midtown
 Raleigh, N.C.
 Registration and details: ascfg.org