



# My Flower Farm Adventure

Time spent on the farm allowed new flowers and design skills to grow and flourish.

By **Bethany Karn**



If my Instagram feed is to be believed, there is currently a growing army of flower farmers, usually fit and beautiful young women, turning their talents toward floral design. I bucked the trend by leaving the design studio and heading out to the farm. The lure of locally grown flowers was such a siren song that I happily spent a year in the elements, pulling weeds and swatting away gnats. It's

no big surprise that my year on the flower farm gave me a deep sunburn and respect for hard work. But trust me when I say the farm grew my design skills, as well.

Back when I was learning floral design, I won a scholarship to study with the renowned **Hitomi Gilliam, AIFD, EMC**. She cheered us on as we created towers of roses and gravity-defying floral art installations. Luckily for me, she was also a patient teacher. After my design attempts fell apart in front of her, she patted my back and gently suggested I work on my “clean finish.”



In design principals, the clean finish is not merely a seamless and uncluttered design, but the term also refers to invisible and attractive mechanics. A floral piece with a clean finish looks as if it suddenly appeared that way, free from the grubby fingerprints of a bumbling designer (aka me).

A flower farm is about as far away from a clean finish as a designer can get. A farm is the messy beginning. This is where the mechanics are not

merely visible but they are rusted and creaking; they are bent under the weight of a late spring snow, washing away in a rain-storm and baking dry in the August sun.

Farming is not gardening; this cannot be said enough. There is forever unfinished work, thousands of microscopic seeds yet to plant and nonstop weeds. There are stinging saddleback caterpillars lurking in branches and snakes under the plastic weed barriers. At planting time when the field is full of icy mud, one may need a “princess blanket” – (as in, “Go fetch princess here a blanket. She doesn’t like her knees to get wet.”) You can be a designer on the farm, but please, don’t be a princess.



Thanks to **Mark and Madgie McGaughan**, of **M&M Plants** in Comus, Md., my skill set now includes driving fence posts and starting plants from cuttings. I now no longer jump (much) at spiders. I developed biceps. For me, their farm became the rough tableau where nature’s designs stood out. The breathtaking jade and gold jewel of a monarch chrysalis was a study in form and opulence.

Butterflies clinging to *Dahlias* were ikebana-esque in their dramatic minimalism. Dynamic tension was on display as an Old man’s beard *Clematis* wound its way through a mass of ‘Limelight’ *Hydrangeas*.

Mother Nature is another patient, if unpredictable, teacher, and her designs are not merely clean but perfect. If you’re game, designers, I promise you’ll learn a lot, as I did, and find yourself outstanding in your field. ■

## DETAILS

**ButterKup Flowers:** [butterkupflowers.com](http://butterkupflowers.com), [@butterkup\\_flowers](https://www.instagram.com/butterkup_flowers)

# A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

## IN THE STUDIO ----- VERSUS ----- ON THE FARM

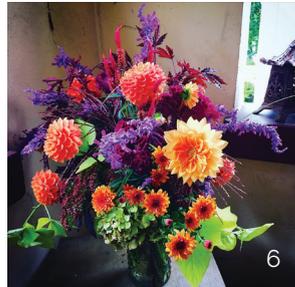
- Clean finish
  - Hidden mechanics
  - Bridezillas
  - Up until 3 a.m. on Valentine's Day eve to deal with orders
  - Gauze and tulle
  - The client is always right
- Messy beginnings
  - Visible rust
  - Saddleback caterpillars
  - Up at 3 a.m. on Valentine's eve to deal with snow on hoop houses
  - "Princess blankets"
  - Mother Nature always has the last word



4



5



6

1) Bethany captured this unexpected combination of silvery poppy pods and dusty miller foliage in the hoop house at M&M Plants, which later inspired her to recreate the frosty silver and pink color palette in farmers' market bouquets.

2) A design based on old man's beard *Clematis* and 'Limelight' *Hydrangeas* (see the original inspiration for this combination in photograph No. 5).

3) Flower farmer and mentor Madgie McGaughan of M&M Plants, emerging from the field with an armload of October flowers.

4) The breathtaking reality of nature – when a monarch butterfly lands on a summer *Dahlia*.

5) Bethany loves observing how flowers and plants naturally perform, and she draws from those scenes to design her arrangements.

6) A floral expression of the season's exuberance.

“Mother Nature is another patient, if unpredictable, teacher, and her designs are not merely clean but perfect.”



Bethany Karn is a florist and flower farmer. She owns ButterKup Flowers in Takoma Park, Md., a local-only floral design studio. She sources from Maryland flower farms and greenhouses to bring local botanicals to her designs all year long for parties, weddings and backyard events.