

The Gardener-Florist

How BLOOM Floral Design's success began in a tiny cutting garden.

After several years living in Colorado and working as a teacher there, Michigan native **Jennifer Haf** returned to her home state, married her Michigan State University sweetheart and settled in Charlevoix, a hamlet on the shores of Lake Michigan, near where her family spent summers. The couple bought a farmhouse with a small piece of land, and Jennifer began growing vegetables to can and preserve, and flowers like zinnias, sunflowers and snapdragons to fill her own and neighbors' vases. "We wanted a lifestyle that wasn't necessarily in the suburbs or in the city. We wanted something quieter and simpler – close to the outdoors and where we could raise our daughter."

Jennifer was inspired to have flowers in her life, drawing from a favorite student flower shop job. "I remember the first moment I smelled a freesia and the first time I saw a poppy that looked like tissue paper – I couldn't believe it was real," she recalls. "There was always this garbage bin in the back of the shop filled with flowers that couldn't be sold but still

had life in them. I would take whatever I could get my hands on and arrange them for my kitchen table."

It was 2008, and the economy was in a tailspin. Jobs for teachers were scarce. "I did flowers for a garden party at my parents' lake house, and people loved them. And I loved the way it made people feel happy. It was my light-bulb moment. I thought it might be a good idea to start my own business."

Michiganites refer to this area as "up north." Its proximity to both beaches and the countryside has made Charlevoix and neighboring communities popular for vacationers from Chicago and Detroit. Nine years ago, Jennifer set up an *al fresco* flower cart on a street corner in the town's shopping district. "I just put my garden flowers in jars, and I'd sell out every weekend – all from my 40-by-60 (foot) plot," she says. "People hadn't see that style for a long time and I actually thought I was doing something wrong because I wasn't going to the wholesale house."

The flower cart evolved into a retail shop that Jennifer ran between 2009 and 2013,



one that served as her launch pad for building a seasonal wedding design studio. "It was really our incubator, and I feel like I was in the right place at the right time. The Internet was growing, and the secret was out about our area's beautiful beachside venues, farms, ballrooms and estates on the lake."

As the business grew, Jennifer continued to harvest "bits and pieces" from her garden to add to arrangements, but it was clear she couldn't grow enough to supply bigger weddings.

She began connecting with local flower farms to source Michigan-grown blooms, in addition to cutting peonies, roses and clematis from her garden, and, of course, foraging for greenery. She also works with **Mayesh Wholesale Florist's** Los Angeles branch to source American-grown flowers and foliage products.

Earlier this spring, **BLOOM Floral Design** returned to retail, operating out of a new 1,000-square-foot space in a tiny alley in Charlevoix. Jennifer has filled the charming 400-square-foot shop with fresh bouquets, plants and American-made and Michigan-made gifts, jewelry, perfumes and art – items that resonate with flower lovers. The production studio occupies the remaining space, where a team of three designers and several studio assistants produce flowers for multiple weddings each weekend, from elopements to high-end luxury ceremonies held mostly between May and October.

And her garden continues to provide, Jennifer says. "The bridal bouquet is the one piece I've always loved to connect with and make extra special. I use my cutting garden as a selling point when I'm talking with brides. I say, 'If you can give us some flexibility, we'd love to pull our own flowers and vines so that when you're looking back at your wedding photos, you'll know those flowers were blooming on the day of your wedding.'"

Growing a flower garden inspired Jennifer's entire philosophy, and as she approaches her 10th anniversary, she knows it's BLOOM's secret ingredient. "A garden-grown bridal bouquet is from the heart. It's from our land. It's from our hands to their hands – and that's special." ■

Details: BLOOM Floral Design

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