



# YOU'RE INVITED TO A Garden Party

Wedding and event designers open an event venue of their own.

By Debra Prinzing  
Photos by Tami & Ryan Photography









Mary Coombs (left) and Dawn Clark (right)

**A** Garden Party Florist, a wedding and event floral studio, is located 45 minutes from Philadelphia and a one-hour drive to several popular Atlantic coast venues. But sisters **Dawn Clark** and **Mary Coombs**, who founded the business in Elmer, N.J., 11 years ago, contend they're, "kind of in the middle of nowhere."

As with the famous line, "if you build it, they will come," the women have discovered that offering a country event space filled with charm has been the best new-business move they've made. "That one-hour radius to major markets has been a beautiful thing," Mary says.

**A Milkhouse Party**, their two-year-old endeavor, resides in a transformed dairy building once run by their late grandfather, Leon M. Tice. Together the tank room, small office and milking parlor add up to a 2,000-square-foot venue that plays host to groups as large as 45. They call the space "a creative refuge."

Long shuttered and relegated for storage, the dairy structure and the surrounding 93-acre farm moved into Mary's hands in 2012 after she and her husband purchased the property. "The milk house had a lot of treasures inside, but it hadn't been a running dairy operation since the 1990s," she says. "We took about a year to clean it out. While doing so, I noticed that the light inside was really nice. At first, Dawn and I thought it could be a place to store props, but then we realized it would be perfect for the DIY wedding parties we hosted."

Producing more than 100 weddings and events annually, the women are committed to keeping their small, experienced team employed all year long. The party venue gives them a way to retain staff during the off-season. Team members help run A Milkhouse Party's private bookings such

as birthday and anniversary parties, showers and workshops. Weddings, however, are out, Mary says. "We don't want to compete with our wedding venues because those are the businesses that have helped us grow A Garden Party's wedding business." Adds Dawn: "We have, however, reached out to those venues to talk with them about catering events for us at A Milkhouse Party."

They self-funded the renovations, wanting to complete construction without borrowing capital. "We wanted to take it back to the bare bones," Mary says. "Now our family treasures decorate the tile walls and the concrete floors and people love it." Retro lighting, cafe-style seating and chalkboard signage lend a playful style to the space.

While at first apprehensive, the sisters are now big fans of DIY floral workshops. "Where we are located in a farming community, DIY is big," Dawn says. "We had to find a way to embrace that rather than fight it all the time."

With a \$3,000 minimum for A Garden Party's full-service weddings, the \$900 minimum for DIY workshops appeals to many couples. The fee includes site rental, cooler storage, flower preparation, flower recipes and two floral design instructors for up to four hours. Groups pay additional for flowers, which are marked up only slightly above wholesale, and delivery or custom services. "When we look at the profit margin on the DIY events, it's similar to our full-service clients. I don't really think people are doing this to save money on their wedding flowers. They're doing it for the experience," Mary adds.

Dawn and Mary grew up on a family farm nearby. They were both involved in Future Farmers of America in high school, and they earned horticulture degrees in college and worked in the nursery industry before beginning A Garden





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Party in 2006. Inspired by those agricultural roots, A Garden Party grows some of its own event flowers, orders American-grown product through their wholesaler, **DV Flora**, and sources from small flower farms in their region. Earlier this year, the sisters partnered with a friend's community supported agriculture (CSA) company to host their first farm-to-dinner "date night," a five-course tasting menu for 45 people that sold out quickly.

Ties to farmland are important to both Dawn and Mary, who point out that A Milkhouse Party is the first in their state to receive a special-use permit for operating a non-farm business on preserved farmland. "We're restoring the farmland like it should be," Mary adds. "The property looks nice; we've planted flowers. Basically, we're two farm girls. It's nice go to the fancy ballrooms of Philadelphia, but I wanted a place where we could bring our family to." ■



#### Details:

A Garden Party: [agardenpartyllc.com](http://agardenpartyllc.com)

A Milkhouse Party: [amilkhouseparty.com](http://amilkhouseparty.com)

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