

The Gardener-Florist

Housed inside a retail tree and shrub nursery, an inventive floral designer embraces nature.

Just outside Portland, Maine, an established garden center called **O'Donal's Nursery** grows trees, shrubs, perennials and more, supplying one of the fastest-growing communities in the state. The business dates to 1960, when current president **Jeff O'Donal's** parents purchased a working nursery – one that had been in the hands of its original owners for four generations.

Today, O'Donal's operates a 60-acre tree and shrub nursery and retail garden center. And, since 2014, The Flower Shop at O'Donal's has been an integral part of the business. According to Jeff O'Donal, the nursery first offered cut flowers to its customers as a one-time Valentine's Day promotion. "Then people came in for Easter and asked, 'what happened to the cut flowers?'"

The opportunity was obvious and O'Donal's converted an office and storage room into a store-within-a-store, adding a three-door cooler and design space.

Opening a retail florist shop inside a garden center presented a lot of synergies for O'Donal's staff. But the business really began to thrive when **Rayne Grace Hoke** joined as floral manager in early 2016, O'Donal says. "We needed someone fully dedicated to floral."

Flower-sourcing for Rayne is entirely different from traditional flower shop practices. "She'll go out with

nothing and come back with an armload of unique things that nobody else would use," O'Donal says. "Every time I see Rayne outdoors with her apron and snips, I know something incredible is coming."

Prior to joining O'Donal's, Rayne worked for 14 years at **Snell Family Farm**, growers of edibles and flowers, and logged several years at a conventional flower shop in Boston.

Helping shape the way O'Donal's does flowers has been a dream, she says. "I went in and said, let's do weddings and work with couples who support Maine-grown. On a daily basis, I'm jumping in the golf cart with buckets of water and you'll find me driving around the nursery stock or wild-crafting at

the edges of the property. In winter, I'm traipsing out to the burn pile and asking the crew not to burn branches that they've pruned because I know I can bring those branches inside to force."

Still in awe of the freedom she has to trim from acres of hydrangeas or to use the tree and shrub inventory for wedding rentals, Rayne says there's amazing collaboration between the flower shop and the nursery.

"I'd say that 90 percent of what we use in floral arrangements comes directly from O'Donal's, especially in the summer," Rayne says. She sources from other flower farms in the Portland area, including her previous employers at Snell Family Farm and also



Rayne Grace Hoke with her American Flowers Week installation at O'Donal's Nursery

Broadturn Farm, both Slow Flowers members.

Earlier this year, after studying with **Susan McLeary** at the Whidbey Island Flower Workshop (featured in the August issue of *Slow Flowers Journal*), Rayne reimagined O'Donal's expansive campus of indoor greenhouse space and outdoor growing fields as a potential backdrop for large-scale floral installations. She began with a botanical garland created from cuttings throughout the nursery, installed from the rafters of the retail marketplace. Staff used the giant piece to promote American Flowers Week around Independence Day.

"One of the amazing things about working here are my coworkers -- they are all supportive," she says. "We turned the whole nursery into a celebration of American flowers."

Next, Rayne created a towering headpiece -- shaped like a beehive hairdo -- for a fantasy-styled shoot. "I was out with Calder, my coworker, hacking hundreds of *hydrangeas*. When I saw them littering the ground I had this idea of building a beehive."

With a group of fellow florists in the area (they call themselves the "Beehive Girls"), Rayne and team constructed a three-foot tall chicken wire headpiece attached to an O'Donal's baseball cap; then they layered hundreds of flowers



onto the wire base.

Calder Bales agreed to pose for a series of whimsical looks using props like a tea cup-and-saucer and an old-fashioned pipe. "He was so open to our suggestions, even when we asked if he would be mind taking off his shirt" Rayne laughs.

One might ask, "what's the point of these crazy creations anyway?" and Rayne has a ready reply: "O'Donal's supports these installations and styled shoots. We want to use them in social media. For example, in the spring, when we're promoting hydrangea sales, we'll use the beehive photos to highlight all the varieties and ask customers to guess how many hydrangea blooms were used to build the beehive."

Her newest piece features a winter foliage theme, including foraged Maine moss, lichen, acorns and greenery. "The way I look at O'Donal's is that I'm an artist and I see them as my patrons," she says. "They truly support me and the vision we have for the nursery. They support my creativity and they respect my business sense, so it's a fantastic partnership." ■

Details:

Venue: O'Donal's Nursery @odonalsnursery

Designer: Rayne Grace Hoke @kittywitchbotanicals

Beehive Girls: Bre Emhiser @stem_and_vine, Michelle Rech @electricflora

Photography: Patricia Takacs, Kivalo Photography @kivalo

Model: Calder Bales, O'Donal's Nursery