

Slow Flowers JOURNAL

BY DEBRA PRINZING

I Do, Aloha Style

Grace Flowers Hawaii captures a big slice of the destination wedding market on the Big Island.

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A November 2017 ceremony on the Kohala Coast features an abundance of local tropical flowers and foliage, including cymbidium, phalaenopsis, zipper and mokara orchids, bromeliads, heliconia, anthurium, pincushion protea, ginger, plumeria, bottlebrush, eucalyptus, pepperberry foliage, laue and kupukupu ferns, raphis palm, monstera, palm berries and ti leaves. The bride wears a hanging white crown flower choker lei; the groom wears a three-strand maile lei.

Design: Grace Flowers Hawaii; Coordination: Vintage and Lace Weddings; Photo © Fletch Photography

According to State of Hawaii's Vital Statistics' records, 13,534 non-resident marriage licenses were issued in 2016, the most recent year reported. Of that total, the Island of Hawaii issued 1,526 licenses, putting destination weddings on "the Big Island" behind Maui, Honolulu and Kauai, respectively.

Alison Grace Higgins, owner of **Grace Flowers Hawaii** based in the town of Honokaa, believes more couples are discovering the island and its huge potential for vacation-ceremonies and elopements. Since opening Grace Flowers Hawaii in 2012, her wedding bookings have increased from 22 weddings in 2013 to 250 in 2016, with as many as 30 bookings per month in 2017. When I interviewed Alison and her studio manager and media coordinator **Nicole Cordier** earlier this year, they reported having booked 33 weddings and events in January 2018 alone. Grace Flowers Hawaii doesn't require a minimum budget and works with ceremonies of all sizes. The majority of clients' floral budgets range between \$2,000 and \$3,000 with a guest count of 60, Alison says.

She chose to locate the retail shop and studio in Honokaa, which is a one-hour drive in either direction to the resorts of Kohala Coast and Hilo, where more locals are wed.

"Honokaa is a really quaint town with a rich history," Alison explains. "When I opened, there wasn't a flower shop here. The town has the only public high school in a 40-mile radius, so when I first started out the school's winter ball and proms generated some of our first floral business."

Alison and Nicole give two reasons for Grace Flowers Hawaii's expanding wedding business: social media and vendor referrals. "Having a strong social media presence is important, but so is cultivating relationships with the coordinators who plan weddings on the island," Alison says.

(Below) From left: Grace Flowers Hawaii owner Alison Higgins, with Jenna Baum and studio manager Nicole Cordier, stand in the doorway to their shop on Honoka'a's main street.

Photo: © Couple Cups Photography



She adds, “We work with most of them and do a high volume with three or four planners. Also, once a resort discovers that we’re really serious about what we are doing, it lands us on the preferred vendor list. Right now, we’re listed as preferred vendors for about six of the main resorts on the Kohala Coast.”

Nicole says it’s equally important to post beautiful images of flowers, couples and venues on the Grace Flowers Hawaii’s website and on social media. After discovering the company, most brides and their coordinators check graceflowershawaii.com where galleries showing personal flowers, ceremony decor and reception decor appear and are constantly updated.

The women are self-described plant geeks, influenced by a love of botany and their personal histories. Alison grew up on her family’s plant nursery in nearby Kamuela. She’s been designing flowers since she was a 10-year-old who made plumeria leis with her sisters to sell for \$3 each on the roadside by their home. Today, Grace Flowers Hawaii is quite a family affair, as Alison’s father **Mike Higgins**, brother **Ryan Higgins**, sister **Shannon Smith** and boyfriend **Nick Civitano** are all involved in the business.

Nicole moved to the island four years ago and joined the Grace Flowers Hawaii team in 2015. She brought with her an extensive understanding of the local flower movement in the Pacific Northwest, where she previously served as the first staff member of the **Seattle Wholesale Growers Market**, a producer’s cooperative. With shop manager **Shelly Espin** and the rest of their team, the women seek out small-scale flower farms on the island, encouraging production and incorporating as many Hawaiian-grown and foraged botanicals as possible in their designs.

“Some of the farms are starting to grow more product based on our demand, and there’s also a huge push with the ‘Tropical Nouveau’ aesthetic,” Alison says. Foraging from plants that grow prolifically on the island is another way to keep things local. The company has cultivated sources for eucalyptus and hydrangeas from property owners who give them permission to harvest.

Grace Flowers Hawaii’s ongoing support for local botanicals means farmers and nursery owners are eager to go the extra step when the studio has a big event or wedding request. “To encourage some of our farms, we keep standing orders,” Nicole explains. “It ensures the viability of the farm in the first place, even when things might be a little slower in the shop.”

The business also sources from local makers who produce the traditional men’s lei, called “Maile.” By guaranteeing a standing order with local artists, they purchase as many as 20 pieces weekly.

There is a subset of clients who ask for local, Hawaiian-grown wedding florals, according to Alison and Nicole. “We have some brides who are really conscientious and say, ‘I

only want local flowers,’ and that’s amazing,” Alison says. “We’re seeing more anthurium used in bouquets, which is really exciting for someone born and raised on the Big Island where anthuriums grow in our backyards. It’s exciting for me to see them become trendy. The ‘Tropical Nouveau’ trend inspires brides who want tropicals mixed in with their roses and other traditional wedding flowers.”

Adds Nicole, “We also love combining more temperate, locally-grown flowers like dahlias, dianthus or snapdragons with tropicals. There’s so much material here and we love working with it.”

A ceremony at Fairmont Orchid near Pauoa Bay is framed by a vivid Grace Flowers Hawaii-designed arch of *bougainvillea*, *dendrobium*, *mokara* and *phalaenopsis* orchids. The bride wears a white *dendrobium* orchid lei; the groom wears a three-strand maile lei.

Coordinator: Jots of Thoughts Weddings and Events Inc.
Photo: © Bikini Birdie Photography



(Clockwise from top left) All the botanicals in this Grace Flowers Hawaii bridal bouquet are Big Island-grown, including *cymbidium* orchids, *ranunculus*, gardenias, crown flower, pincushion protea, blue jade, *anthurium*, snapdragons, shell ginger, *bougainvillea*, *amaranthus*, *clivia* and spiral *eucalyptus*. Venue: Kukui Hale B&B; Model: Michelle Hartman; Photo: © Sarah Anderson Photography.

Grace Flowers Hawaii’s Jenna Baum makes a lei with lantern *ilima* and *tuberosa*, Photo: © Couple Cups.

A beach reception at the Fairmont Orchid; Coordinator: Jots of Thoughts Weddings and Events Inc.; Photo: © Bikini Birdie Photography



Destination Weddings on the Island of Hawaii

Grace Flowers Hawaii’s wedding business has exploded for many reasons. One of which is because applying for a marriage license in Hawaii is easy. The state has no residency or U.S. citizenship requirements. There is no waiting period and a blood test is not required. Prospective couples must simply apply together with a completed official marriage license form before a marriage license agent and pay the \$60 fee.

Grace Flowers Hawaii has developed some best practices that ensure success for their couples’ ceremonies:

- **Know your coordinator and vendors:** Know who’s doing the best job and is in high demand and give them your best work. Most of the resort venues have on-site wedding coordinators, but many couples also hire a day-of coordinator to handle their needs.

- **View the bride as “repeat business:”** Alison says. “They will refer you to their friends in the future.”

- **Always bring extra flowers to the venue:** “We’ve learned that having extra of everything allows us to make that last-minute centerpiece or boutonniere that someone forgot to tell us about,” Alison says.

- **Pre-make as much as possible in advance:** Especially ceremony pieces like arbors and garlands. “Because we’re almost always traveling at least one hour from the venue, we want to be able to get to the location and just touch things up, rather than design on site,” Alison says.

- **Keep things fresh and hydrated:** “We’ll bring spray bottles and extra jugs of water, especially for final decor and things we might not be able to tube or have in water. We’ve gotten away without tubing all sorts of ingredients – like *hydrangeas* – as long as they’re doused before the ceremony,” Alison says. ■