



Oregon's Organic Wedding Flowers

Flower farmer grows cut flowers for weddings and flower shops in agriculturally rich Rogue Valley

Le Mera Gardens: lemeragardens.com; @lemeragardens
Jacklily Seasonal Floral Design: @jacklilyfloral; @jacklilyfloral
Photography Credits: TK

Destination weddings in the Rogue Valley have been made popular by the proliferation of wineries, ranches, barns and other romantic venues, not to mention the region's natural beauty and Ashland's famous theatrical scene. It's not uncommon for couples that attended Southern Oregon University to return here to wed.

Many embrace the region's unique character by choosing locally grown flowers for their ceremony. They often find **Le Mera Gardens**, located outside Ashland, Ore., and schedule an appointment to "shop" for blooms from flower farmer **Joan Thorndike's** well-stocked refrigerator truck. Her shop-on-wheels overflows with hundreds of stems, organized by variety and color, allowing DIY wedding parties as well as florists, to hand-select exactly what they want to carry down the aisle or festoon their ceremony later that week. Flowers are freshly harvested on Wednesdays and available for bridal parties to pick up on Thursdays.

For Joan – who started Le Mera Gardens 26 years ago and who is an organic flower farming pioneer in the state – the sensory pleasure that her customers experience when they smell, touch and hold her just-harvested blooms is gratifying. Her farm supplies florists, weddings, special events, private clients, restaurants and grocery stores in southern Oregon and northern California cities.

She added the on-farm flower truck to satisfy requests from couples that wanted to arrange their own wedding flowers. "It seemed more fun for them to buy from a local farm owned by someone in the community rather than going into a grocery store," Joan explains. She has been mindful to structure her pricing so as to never undercut her longtime and loyal retail florists who've supported her for decades.

Often the florist and Joan will work in tandem to best serve the wedding party. "One of my florists arranges to meet her client at the flower truck; they choose together which flowers the florist will use in the bridal bouquets and which flowers will be arranged by the bridal party, such as for the reception tables," she explains.

Le Mera Gardens has expanded from Joan's original 1-1/3-acre plot to a co-farming and land-sharing partnership begun about 15 years ago with **Fry Family Farm**, an organic produce grower, adding 10 acres of flower fields.

"The flower truck became my headquarters," Joan explains. Because wedding customers often live outside the area and won't see their options until shopping day, Joan has developed a robust website to help in pre-planning. "I have a calendar that allows people to go back to the previous year, check the date of their wedding and see a list of available flowers. In mid-summer, that list can have close to 150 species."



Joan is quick to insist she is “not a designer,” although her experience and product knowledge has proven invaluable for customers. She suggests they send her two inspiration photos from Pinterest, which usually reveal the couple’s aesthetic and allows Joan to zero in on color palette and design elements such as foliage and accent flowers. She guides customers via email so that everything is well documented.

“I spend time dialoguing at first so we can decide whether buying from the farm is the right place for that customer. Once we’ve honed things down between that Pinterest image and their description, then it’s about budget.”

Joan has a three-tier pricing system with the best wholesale prices reflecting her loyalty to brick-and-mortar retail florists who buy consistently all season long and comprise 50 percent of Le Mera’s business. Studio florists who purchase flowers less consistently pay a slightly higher wholesale rate than retail florists. For weddings or the

general public, Le Mera prices flowers two to three times wholesale rates, with a \$100 minimum for local customers.

Joan often sends business to her florist clients, either when the bride reveals she really wants someone else to design her flowers or when it becomes clear the client isn’t completely comfortable with the uncertainty of what might be blooming the week of their ceremony.

Isabella Thorndike Church, Joan’s daughter and owner of **Jacklily Seasonal Floral Design**, grew up helping her mother grow flowers and now specializes in local-only, full-service wedding design. “There are different levels of bridal customers,” she observes. “And some are going to want to work with a florist, while

others want to go the DIY route.”

Knowing this, Isabella is flexible with prospective brides who ask her to design their ceremony’s personal flowers but wish to use Le Mera Gardens’ flower truck option for bulk blooms to decorate the venue.

“In 10 years time, when it’s your anniversary, you’ll remember the flowers in your wedding when you see them blooming in the area. That’s a visceral trigger.”

- Joan Thorndike, Le Mera Gardens.



“As an employee of the farm, I have an intimate relationship with what is in the fields. I think it allows me to be a much better designer because when I am representing my separate business -- Jacklily Seasonal Floral Design -- I can choose specific flowers for my clients’ bouquets or arrangements while harvesting other orders for Le Mera Gardens,” Isabella says.

The demand for locally grown wedding flowers continues to grow, and Joan estimates that she supplies about 100 ceremonies between May and September.

“A portion of these customers wants to support local businesses -- probably 30 percent. Others are driven by price or come to me because of a word-of-mouth recommendation. The one thing I’ve learned over time is not to guilt-trip anyone about going local. It’s my responsibility to prove that buying local means your wedding flowers are beautiful, in-season and of good quality.”

Adds Isabella, “Over the years, the comments I’ve heard from bridal parties who have worked with my mom is that the floral experience was one of the best parts of their wedding. Between the price of the flowers and the time that goes into arranging, DIY isn’t necessarily about saving money, but shopping from the truck and putting together your flowers with friends and family is an experience that has value and allows everyone to be part of the wedding.” ■