

Slow Flowers JOURNAL

BY DEBRA PRINZING

Sister Act

Flower Duet's sibling-owners are Southern California floral entrepreneurs who combine their diversified design studio with a passion for education.

Details: Flower Duet, flowerduet.com, @flowerduetta
Online courses: flowerduet.teachable.com

Casey Coleman Schwartz and Kit Coleman Wertz, partners in the aptly-named design studio **Flower Duet**, manage a harmonious mix of floral offerings. They make a conscious effort to source their flowers and foliage from local farms in Southern California, and credit their longstanding relationship with wholesalers and flower farmers at the Los Angeles Flower District – as well as familiarity with seasonal product sourcing – for successful niches in both wedding and events and floral design workshops.

Raised primarily on the East Coast, the sisters grew up visiting their maternal grandparents in Southern California. As adults, after adventurous careers elsewhere, the sun-and-sand lifestyle drew them to Los Angeles.

Casey spent 12 years at sea serving mostly as an officer onboard cruise ships including Cunard's *Sea Goddess I*, where, for part of her time as social staff, she was responsible for all the flowers – from staterooms to public spaces. "Whatever port we were in, I would actually go ashore and find flowers at little kiosks or marts and haggle with the local currency; then I'd organize myself back onboard with the flowers," she says.

By the time Casey finished the cruise ship life and landed in Los Angeles, she was fluent enough in floristry that Kit asked her to design her wedding flowers. "I said sure, because that's what I say to most things and then we figure it out," Casey laughs.

The experience ignited a passion in both women, and they began taking friends to the L.A. Flower District to shop for flowers to bring home and arrange. Teaching others how to source and create bouquets led to requests from friends to design their wedding flowers, and by 1999, Kit and Casey formed Flower Duet. "It was definitely a side business," Kit explains.

By 2009, both women had young families, so the idea of leaving other careers for a creative business with flexible hours was appealing. When Casey's husband, a commercial advertising photographer, leased studio space in Torrance, a city in Los Angeles's South Bay, Flower Duet moved in as well.

"We've got him into one corner, and fortunately he mostly shoots on location outside the studio," Casey jokes. Now they have dedicated space for bridal consults and can accommodate 20 students comfortably – although Flower

(Opposite) California-grown dahlias, larkspur and greenery captures the setting with gorgeous Alaskan peonies in a July wedding in Los Angeles. (This page) Casey Coleman Schwartz (left) and Kit Coleman Wertz (right) at a wedding industry event they co-sponsored at Terranea Resort in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif. © Miki and Sonja Photography.



Duet occasionally hosts much larger groups, like teaching floral design to 45 people on a recent press junket for a Hollywood film promotion.

With easy access from the L.A. freeways and plenty of parking, the location is ideal for workshops, a significant facet of Flower Duet's portfolio. "With the new space, we were able to decide what we wanted our business to be. You can only do so many weddings a year. We had all this studio space in the middle of the week and that's when we started weeknight classes," she adds.

Workshops comprise at least 50 percent of Flower Duet's revenue, divided into on-site and off-site options. In addition to private, one-on-one teaching for aspiring professionals, the sisters continue to lead monthly **L.A. Flower Mart**

the Huntington Library is an endorsement. It's also rewarding for us to teach all ages and people of all skills. I don't think we'd ever take it out of our business because it's what we love to do."

The community-building continues, because many students who have studied with Kit and Casey return to freelance for Flower Duet. "They've been supportive and encouraging and I love freelancing for them," says **Julia Kennedy**, who now owns **A Gathered Field**, a Long Beach, Calif.-based design studio. "They always talk about how there is enough work to go around; how there is a style for everybody and every client."

Playing to their strengths, Kit, who has a background in journalism, photography and graphic design, handles



(Above, from left) Flower Duet has taught design courses at The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens since 2007, including a kids' class on tussie musies led by Casey; a bridal bouquet by Flower Duet featuring garden roses, nigella, snowberries and tweedia © Kit Wertz photography.

tours, charging \$20 for their early Saturday-morning session, paired with an optional \$85 design workshop at their studio, typically focused on a specific seasonal flower.

There are also Wednesday evening wedding design workshops tailored for DIY brides, and ongoing floral design classes taught at cultural institutions, including a decade-plus relationship with the famed **Huntington Library, Art Collection and Botanical Gardens**, as well as the **Autry Museum of the American West** and **South Coast Botanic Garden**.

Kit and Casey view teaching as a brand-building endeavor. "It's reputation management," Kit says. "Whoever you associate yourself with is part of your brand, so teaching at

Flower Duet's marketing, newsletter, website and social media, while Casey manages sales meetings with prospective brides and corporate clients. Both design, and they describe the Flower Duet style as trending toward European, although they are excited by just about any aesthetic that makes clients happy.

"I think our look is fresh," Casey explains. "Having the L.A. Flower Mart practically at our doorstep has been wonderful because so many of the wholesalers are carrying locally-grown flowers. We're there in the mornings when the growers arrive to deliver buckets of stock or snapdragons or gerberas to our favorite vendors and to see the



(Clockwise, from top left) At a Terreana Resort dinner for fashion and wedding industry journalists, Flower Duet's centerpieces featured American-grown roses, greenery, dahlias, raspberries, Blushing Bride protea and calla lilies ©Terranea Resort; a simple bouquet of white astilbe contrasts beautifully with a blue bridesmaid dress © Miki and Sonja Photography; and San Diego-grown Blushing Bride protea is nestled among anemones, Alaskan peonies and locally-grown olive and ruscus greens in this blue-and-white bouquet by Flower Duet © Miki and Sonja Photography.



dahlias and California-grown roses."

Balanced with the workshops is a wedding design portfolio that has grown significantly thanks to close ties with venues that name Flower Duet to preferred vendor lists. Flower Duet's enviable location, just two miles from the Pacific Coast, the Palos Verdes Peninsula and its hotels and resorts, means the studio supplies event flowers for at least 10 nearby properties.

Flower Duet's newest venture is online teaching. Kit and Casey are both comfortable in front of the camera and often appear on local television, but they have long wished to produce web-based floral design workshops of their own. **Teachable.com**, a new web-based platform, has made it easy to produce and host step-by-step floral design video classes. Launched in January for a \$8-monthly subscription, Flower Duet's *Flower Arranging Fridays* is their first series, but Kit hopes to add a wedding-focused series soon.

"Educating customers through tours of the Flower Mart, videos and in-depth floral workshops has allowed our business to grow," Kit maintains. It's a model that the sisters believe others can adapt in their own markets, heightening consumers' appreciation of flowers and benefitting the entire industry. ■