



Plant Kingdom

The houseplant craze is part retro and part modern, and it's boosting sales for retail florists.



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SOLABEE FLOWERS & BOTANICALS,
POT AND BOX, AND URBAN POPPY

A few months ago, *The Wall Street Journal* published a page-one story titled “Forget the Cat Ladies, Meet the Plant Parents,” followed quickly by a *Los Angeles Times* piece headlined “Love Being #plantparents.”

More than a year earlier, in June 2017, *Florists’ Review* devoted an entire issue to “Designing with Living Plants,” so we’re not too surprised to see major media outlets discovering houseplants: tropicals, succulents, epiphytes, orchids and more.

While we forecasted the current living plant renaissance, it’s a topic worthy of more than occasional coverage in these pages. This is because planting design’s role in floristry is not a short-term trend. Like the cultural shift we’ve witnessed taking place around flower sourcing, the consumers’ embrace of living plants is a phenomenon that’s here to stay.

This is especially important for retail florists dedicated to designing with local and seasonal cut flowers. Why? For one reason, when October rolls around in many parts of North America, temperatures cool and the flower farms that have supplied your shop begin to wind down for the dormant season, making indoor plants more important than ever. On the following four pages are Q&As with three retail florists who reveal their personal plant obsessions.

Solabee Flowers & Botanicals’ modern plant-centric installation features hanging houseplants, naturally suspended Kokedama designs and epiphytes such as Tillandsias, which inspires customers to experience living plants in a fresh, new way.



(left) Viewed from the upstairs mezzanine, the North Portland Solabee store features plants, plants and more plants.

(below) A Solabee installation featuring Tillandsias-as-mandala art.



Sarah Helmstetter and Alea Joy of Solabee Flowers & Botanicals, in their plant and floral shop, one of their two retail locations in Portland, Ore.



Portland, Ore.: Solabee Flowers & Botanicals

(two retail locations)

Details: solabeeflowers.com, @solabeeflowers

Partners **Sarah Helmstetter** and **Alea Joy** balance floristry with botany, and in doing so, their modern floral brand is synonymous with rare and uncommon plants.

The partners recently began propagating plant offspring from their collection of NFS (not for sale) “mother plants,” in response to demand outpacing supply. If you follow Solabee’s Instagram feed, you might see a *Monstera adansonii* with more than 1,000 likes within three hours of posting or a trailing *Philodendron* vine that’s garnered more than 3,000 likes.

Since teaming up more than a decade ago, Sarah and Alea specialize in sustainable design for weddings and events. They source from local farmers, grow their own flowers and harvest design ingredients from house plants – such as *Begonias*, *Tillandsias*, orchids and ferns.

The women often guide customers toward living plants as a sustainable alternative to cut flowers. They believe that living plants add character and serve as the perfect complement to the wild and imaginative floral arrangements created at Solabee.

In April 2016, Solabee moved to a light-filled corner storefront in North Portland; a second outlet opened in Northwest Portland this past July. The stores’ display areas, shelves and walls are lush and verdant with ceiling-to-floor flowers, plants, pottery and accessories. Both locations serve a customer base that’s diverse in age and income level.

“We are constantly striving to make sure we can sustain as a brand by being inclusive and accessible to everyone, especially first-time plant buyers or segments of the population that don’t traditionally have experience with the types of florals and plants we carry,” says Alea.

Solabee also offers an “interior greening” custom plant design service that supplies green workspaces, including Airbnb’s corporate offices in Portland. I recently spoke with Sarah Helmstetter about Solabee’s plant-centric philosophy.

Why plants? Alea and I share a love for houseplants. Both of our homes are filled with plants. During the recession, selling and designing with plants offered us a way to make a little money and continue doing what we loved – working with flowers. We found that people wanted something that was a little longer lasting. We would make these beautiful displays and arrangements that Alea showcased on Instagram and other social media, and it just took off.

What are your sourcing practices? As with flowers, we try to buy locally first. There are some rare and unusual plant growers in this area. We also buy from local nurseries.

How about pricing? We have \$3 plants, and we have plants that are more than \$600. Pricing really depends on the plant’s rarity.

How you differentiate? We try to have something different

from what customers can get everywhere else. We want to offer selections you can’t get at The Home Depot, Trader Joe’s or IKEA. Plant education is a big part of our model. We spend a lot of time making sure what people buy have the best chance of long-term sustainability in their homes.

What are your store’s related products? We work with a handful of local Portland ceramicists and macramé artists to highlight anything that has to do with plants, including the best of what’s available locally. We have tiny terra-cotta pots for \$2, and then we have hand-carved and locally thrown pots that are more than \$200.

How do you handle challenges? Plants have gotten really popular in the last couple of years and that, in combination with hurricanes in Florida, has made it challenging to source enough plants for two stores and for our corporate clients. We are at the point where we need to be able to supply some of our own plants because the local market cannot bring things in fast enough for our needs.

Detroit, Mich.: Pot and Box

Details: potandbox.com, @potandbox, @potandboxplantstore

Deeply rooted in plants since 1996, **Lisa Waud** founded **Pot and Box** in 2007, offering container design and landscaping services to Ann Arbor clients, and later expanding into event and floral design for customers in Detroit and beyond.

This floral innovator has attracted considerable attention to Detroit’s design community through her 2015 project “**Flower House**” and 2016 **Detroit Flower Week**, among other projects. In December 2017, she moved Pot and Box from a studio-based business into a 900-square-foot design studio and retail storefront in the Fisher Building, an historic Art Deco landmark in downtown Detroit.

Pot and Box offers full-service deliveries, bespoke and *a la carte* wedding florals, event design, and a popular ice cream truck-turned mobile flower shop that brings flowers and plants to community events and venues around Detroit, in a pop-up store fashion. I spoke with Lisa Waud, who gave some details about her brand and typical customer.

Why plants? It was certainly my plan to have a plant store as well as a flower shop. I come from a gardening background, so having plants on hand is not unusual. It felt natural and very necessary to have Pot and Box be half plant store-half flower shop.

What is the vibe inside Pot and Box’s new shop? It’s very jungle-y and mostly filled with plants. We have beautiful retail windows, like an open kitchen in a restaurant, which allows everyone in the Fisher Building to look in and see us potting, working, making flowers, etc. The front area is packed with plants and handmade items. We display buckets of flowers and arrangements on the counter by the register.

How has selling plants helped your brand? I originally branded my business Pot and Box because I come from gardening and my favorite things to plant are container gardens. When I started doing events and weddings with fresh flowers, my soul wanted me to incorporate potted plants because I didn't want to get too far from my favorite things.

Who is your customer? Our store looks at Detroit's New Center residential district, and we know half the folks who live there because they come into our shop every week. They are really passionate about plants and want to have an experience where they're talking to someone who knows as much or more about plants than they do. They're the ones on social media, mostly millennials. The other main demographic is older women who work in our building. They want nice big plants – something they don't have to think about much. But they're not checking in at Pot and Box on Instagram.

What is your market like? The closest places to buy houseplants besides Pot and Box are The Home Depot and IKEA. We make a point of having hand-illustrated plant care cards, and we rarely have a transaction with a customer without a conversation about where that plant will go and his or her home's light level, for example.

How do you differentiate from mass-market retailers? We pot most of our plants in simple terracotta. For people who want something special, we do carry a few local ceramic artists' work, and we also carry containers from **Accent Décor** and other lines. We have a dedicated Pot and Box Plant Store account on Instagram, separate from the Pot and Box account. All of my staff has log-ins, so anybody can take pictures in his/her style and talk in his/her voice or make videos – and especially for local customers, they can know what's going on and follow us there. We also have an iPhone for the shop, so we can text customers, and it has turned into a plant-doctor hotline, where people know they can send photos of their plants at home and we can diagnose [disease or pest issues] via text. That accessibility goes along with the branding of a modern plant store.

How are you stimulating sales? People come in and they compare our store to a conservatory like the one at Detroit's **Belle Isle Conservancy**, which dates to 1902. They come in just to be around the green and to smell the air. What I'm working on with staff members is converting our visitors to buyers. It's not great if we post a photo of a pinstriped *Calathea* and we get 400 likes but no one buys it. So we want to



(left) Lisa Waud, owner of Pot and Box

(below) A Pot and Box display where merchandising matters — plants, products, flowers.

(opposite page, top) Urban Poppy's popular Tillandsia wreath, which sells for \$70; (bottom) Anissa Manzo teamed with fine art photographer and videographer Vitor Lindo to produce a styled shoot accented with her plants.

© Vitor Lindo.



post that *Calathea* with the question “Who wants this?” Then, when someone says “Me!” we send them an invoice, they purchase it and they have to come into the store to pick it up.

We're also throwing around the idea of “Free Delivery Fridays,” and we will post five plants and ask, “Who wants these?” and then they will all go out for delivery to the people who speak up.

We recently offered a houseplant workshop with **Lisa Eldred Steinkopf**, author of a book called *The Houseplant Guru*. We had only 10 seats, and it sold out quickly, so we added a second workshop. The workshops brought customers into Pot and Box. Everyone received a 10 percent discount on purchases that night as well as a 4-inch plant to take home.

How about pricing? We have four-inch pots for \$10, and you can spend up to \$400 on a plant here, too.

Savannah, Ga.: Urban Poppy Botanical Boutique

Details: urbanpoppy.com, [@urbanpoppyshop](https://www.instagram.com/urbanpoppyshop)

Anissa Manzo opened Savannah's Urban Poppy four years ago as a retail boutique specializing in botanically inspired home, garden and lifestyle products, as well as floral design and plants. She describes the 1,200-square-foot studio and retail space as a "modern take on the original florist."

Floral customers are invited to purchase individual stems or staff-designed arrangements. "We wrap flowers, European-style, in brown kraft paper. We have flowers coming in every day from the various farmers we work with," Manzo says. "Our tagline is 'Bringing beauty and nature home.' There's always some bit of nature that goes home with a customer – such as a cut branch that we tie onto the bag with our gray-and-white grosgrain ribbon."

I spoke with Anissa Manzo about what makes Urban Poppy unique and she was eager to elaborate on her business and her customers.

Who is your customer? I have two types of customers: those with green thumbs (the gardener/floral arranger who "gets" what I'm doing) and those who are either afraid they have black thumbs and really want to try or whose homes are devoid of any type of plant life. We've had 12-year-old boys buy a little succulent plant and 95-year-old women who are Master Gardeners. The demographics are all over the place. I can't think of any other retail store, other than perhaps a grocery store, that has such a varied clientele.

What type of plants do you offer? We offer succulents, cacti, air plants, ferns, bromeliads, fiddle-leaf figs, rubber trees – the odder, the better. We also offer terrariums.

What is your best-seller? The mother of all air plants is still the *Tillandsia xerographica*. It's big and beautiful and is a natural décor addition.

How do you incorporate live plants into floral design? Succulents are very big right now in bouquets, and we encourage brides to root them as a keepsake from their bouquets. Also, dish gardens and terrariums for [wedding reception] centerpieces make great guest gifts and are wonderful living reminders of the special day. One of my new ideas is to design a flower arrangement that's incorporated in a potted garden, such as a dish garden, so it's offering customers the best of both worlds. When the flowers fade, the customer still has the potted plant or dish garden.

What are your sourcing practices? We source from a few local farms and also from Florida, which is nearby. I desperately need a source for big funky cacti!

How do you differentiate Urban Poppy? As retailers in the day of Amazon, we have to create something that's,



quite literally, tangible for a customer because you can buy air plants and succulents on Amazon. But for creating that intimate relationship with customers, Amazon can't quite do that yet. I do feel like when I'm selling a plant, I'm selling a pet. I encourage my customers to name their plants as soon as they get home to help them establish an immediate bond, just as they would with a kitten or puppy.

Are you the plant lady? Definitely! I have two young children, and what's been really popular at kids' birthday parties lately is for the parents to say, "No gifts, please." So I've started giving the birthday child his or her first potted plant in a cute little-kid vase. It's better than a pet for teaching responsibility to a child. What better way to learn care-giving than with something that requires air, light, food and water? ■

