

A vintage farmhouse, several outbuildings and five acres outside Seattle give retail florist Jon Robert Throne, AIFD, a lot of opportunity to grow flowers.

# The Florist-Farmer

More florists are growing flowers for their design work.

By Debra Prinzing

Photos courtesy of **Countryside Floral & Garden**,  
**Two Little Buds** and **Clara's Garden**

**T**wo worlds – flower farming and floral design – are closer than they have been for decades as florists with access to a parcel of land are putting down roots and sowing flower seeds. Some plant a few acres; others tend to suburban backyards or even city-sized lots. And while the idea of a floral designer who raises flowers, foliages, herbs and ornamental shrubs to harvest and design arrangements isn't mainstream yet, the florists we asked cite numerous reasons why they're getting their hands in the dirt. Here, three retail florists from different corners of the country share their path from the studio to the field and back to the studio.

For **Jon Robert Throne**, AIFD, owner of two flower shops in the Seattle area, the need to connect with the soil is rooted in his Michigan childhood when he grew tomatoes and a flower garden. As an adult, Jon designed for **Countryside Floral & Garden** in Issaquah, Wash., for 14 years, and then he purchased the business from its prior owners in 2012. He expanded his company one year ago with the purchase of a second flower shop, **The Royal Bee**, in nearby Covington, Wash.

Many flowers for both shops are grown at **Farm, Fare & Floral**, which Jon and his partner purchased four years ago, calling it

“A Gentlemen Farm.” They left a city condo for the five-acre farm and its 1930s farmhouse, located southeast of Seattle. Today, in addition to tidy rows of field flowers, there are two greenhouses, a huge vegetable patch to supply on-site events, as well as cows, ducks, chickens, turkeys and beehives. There are plans to turn an eight-stall stable into an event barn in the future.

“This was not a strategic move,” Jon confides. “I just knew that I wanted to buy dirt because I can grow. I've been gardening since I was five years old.”

Being a gentleman farmer is helping Jon's brand, as he is particularly gifted at growing *Dablias*, the Instagram-worthy bloom that thrives across much of the Pacific Northwest. “At first, my designers did not want to tell customers these flowers were from my farm,” he recalls. “But as we've gotten into it, now they say, ‘Oh, these *Dablias* are from Jon's farm.’ We want the uniqueness; we don't want to look like everybody else.”

By the end of summer, the *Dablias* from Farm, Fare & Floral had their starring moment on the two shops' online stores, with the “Dandy *Dablia*” arrangements offered as nine to 12 stems in a glass or tin vase for \$55.

Jon estimates that his *Dablias* alone generated \$24,000 in retail sales last year. He just wrapped

up the 2018 season with a diverse lineup of varieties: sunflowers, ninebark, sages and other herbs, peonies, *Echinacea*, *Phlox*, artichokes, *Cosmos* and ornamental corn, plus pumpkins and gourds for harvest décor. Even the cabbage and Swiss chard make their way into arrangements. While it's been suggested that he wholesale his flowers, Jon thinks otherwise. "If I'm going to grow flowers, I should just sell them to my own stores and make more money with the markup."

Holding farm-to-table dinners for the past two years has reinforced the fact that Jon's customers want to experience food and flowers on his farm. He has collected an eclectic mix of chairs, china, goblets and silver to accommodate events for up to 150 guests. "I'm working with different chefs and with different wines and menus. Guests love the experience. They have a farm tour with wine and appetizers. We just had a honey tasting and a flower crown class. When people can enjoy the animals, the flowers and the food, then they come to our shops – it's all connected."

## CUSTOMER-DRIVEN DESIGN

Founded in 2004, **Two Little Buds** is owned by daughter **Mindy Staton** and mother **Alice Francis**, which began as a wedding and event floral studio working out of Alice's greenhouse. They eventually opened a full-service retail flower shop in Hamilton, Ohio, recently closing after 11 years to transition to a new hybrid "farmer-florist" model. The Two Little Buds' brand now reflects the women's love of farm-fresh, local product and shows the best botanical choices that each season has to offer.

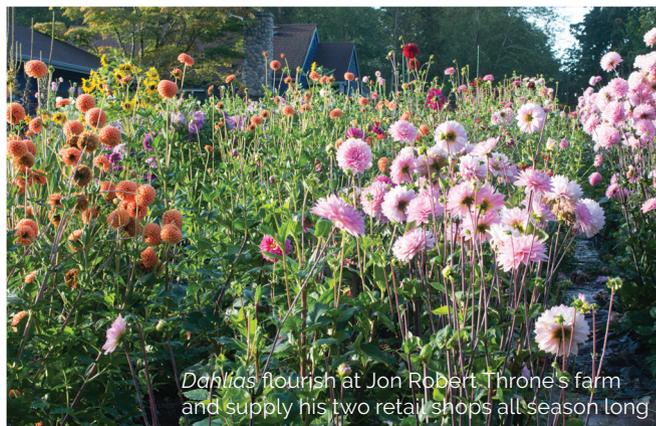
"Our business is primarily based on weddings and events," Mindy explains. "At one point, we were doing about 150 weddings a year. Right now, we're at about 70 weddings a year and we offer a couple different services, from full-service to à la cart. We also offer a DIY-on-the-farm package where we essentially teach clients who come to the farm how to arrange everything they need for their weddings. It's an experience for them."

Mindy and Alice expanded to flower farming in 2016, with the establishment of **Morning Sun Flower Farm**. The farm was born of a few sentences written at a **Floret** design workshop, as Mindy articulated a dream for her future. As she sought balance and a business format change, Mindy convinced her husband, **Josh Staton**, to devote a small portion of their 40-acre Ohio farm to flowers (much of their acreage is leased to commodity crop farmers growing soy and corn).

"Now, our farm feeds our wedding business," Mindy explains. "We also offer CSA [community-supported agriculture] flower subscriptions and hold farm-to-vase dinners and workshops three times a year."



Jon Robert Throne, AIFD



Dahlias flourish at Jon Robert Throne's farm and supply his two retail shops all season long



Two Little Buds' studio storefront

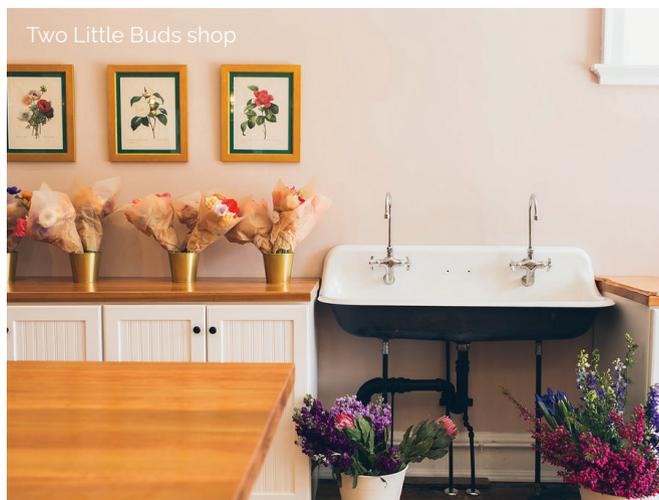
Prior to growing their own flowers, Alice and Mindy sourced from three wholesalers in the Cincinnati area. “For the first nine years, we used imported flowers,” Mindy recalls.

The shift to growing unusual annuals and perennials was also customer driven, she maintains. “Brides were asking us for fresh, local, natural, organic, wild-looking flowers with a loose and airy aesthetic. We couldn’t offer them what they saw on Pinterest or in magazines. Everything looked so different from what we could purchase at our local wholesalers.”

Earlier this year, in April, the women opened a design studio in Hamilton’s newly revived urban district. They shifted from six-days-a-week full-service retail to limited retail hours on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

“Whatever excess we have coming out of the farm after serving weddings and CSA customers, we bring to the store for walk-in shoppers,” Mindy says. “Mom and I were at a point in our business where we were tired of the same thing. We had to change, or we weren’t going to be ahead of our competition. Now, we are opening our customers’ eyes to local and seasonal flowers coming straight from our farm, mostly cut that morning. The quality is better. The flowers look better.”

While the 2018 growing season may have wrapped, Mindy and Alice are already scheming for next spring’s bumper crops. Plans to grow and expand the farm continue, with the latest news: “We’ve received financing for a huge new greenhouse,” Mindy reveals. “I think this new venture that Mom and I have embarked on is more meaningful to us. We are still working just as hard as the old model, but there’s a sense of purpose. We’re not just reselling flowers.”



## FIELD TO FLOWER SHOP

In Mediapolis, Iowa, located in the southeast part of the state, **Clara’s Garden** is a full-service florist and member of the Teleflora network. Founded by **Meredith Hinson** in 2000, Clara’s Garden was inspired by Meredith’s grandmother, **Clara Reif Yohe**, who was known for her backyard garden, full of roses, Iowa perennials and clusters of wildflowers.

Meredith’s daughter, **Jen Hinson**, a former middle-school teacher, was raised in and around her family garden, and while teaching in Houston for several years, she often found herself drawn back to Mediapolis in the summers. “At one point, Jen decided not to go back and teach, and that’s when she was lured into floral design,” Meredith says.

Mom was not surprised, recalling how from a young age Jen identified specific flowers growing in neighbors’ yards.

The two have worked together since 2005. That collaboration expanded in 2016 to planting more cut flowers. “It’s more like a really big garden, but, sure, I call it a farm,” Jen jokes. She, too, was inspired to begin growing her own flowers by attending a Floret workshop.

“I came back, and I was all fired up about having a flower farm. We just gradually added a little bit more every year. We have *Dahlia*s, amaranth, *Cosmos*, *Zinnias*, *Lisianthus* and sunflowers. My parents also have great crab-apple trees and *Viburnum* bushes, which makes a huge difference in what we design with, too. Next year,



(Left) Meredith Hinson and Jen Hinson of Clara's Garden  
(Below) A garden-inspired bridal bouquet by Clara's Garden, including many stems grown by Jen Hinson



we're talking about adding an area just to grow roses. I love roses, and I'm good at growing them." Jen collects wild roses and cuttings from native Iowa Buck roses, which are particularly suitable to their USDA Zone 5A climate.

Product sourcing also encompasses foraging and gleaning. Jen finds branches, foliage and wild orchids at the 150-year-old Hinson family homestead, which is still in her father's family. Come spring, while she harvests her own peony stems, friends and family members share peonies from their own backyards. "At the height of peony season, a good third of our cooler is filled with them, and it really makes a difference in the bottom line," Jen says.

The women educate their community through Instagram and Facebook posts of designs featuring the flowers they grow. "I make sure that I always mention we've grown the flowers I'm showing," she adds.

Access to a diverse palette of flowers has influenced the aesthetic of Clara's Garden bouquets and arrangements, Meredith explains. "We have a unique style, and I think our competitors are more traditional. Jen's designs are avant-garde, but she uses old-fashioned flowers to create them." ■

#### DETAILS

**Jon Robert Throne, AIFD**

Countryside Floral & Garden: [countrysidefloral.com](http://countrysidefloral.com),  
@countrysidefloralandgarden  
Farm, Fare & Floral: [facebook.com/farmfareandfloral](https://facebook.com/farmfareandfloral)

**Mindy Staton and Alice Francis**

Two Little Buds: [twolittlebuds.com](http://twolittlebuds.com), @twolittlebuds  
Morning Sun Flower Farm: @morningsunflowerfarm

**Meredith Hinton and Jen Hinton**

Clara's Garden: [clarasgardenia.com](http://clarasgardenia.com), @clarasgardenmepo