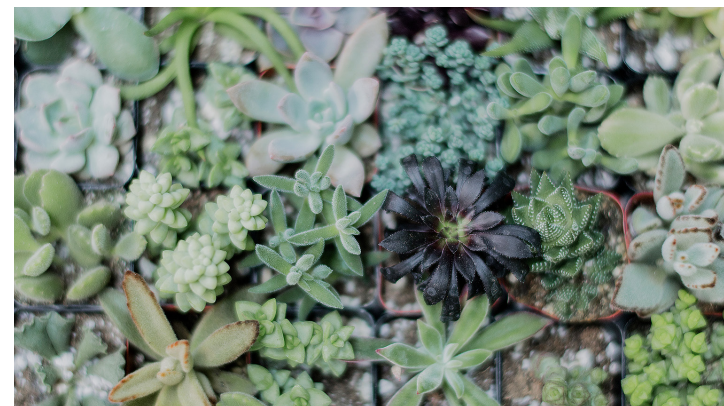




A *Curious* CREATIVE

Passionflower's Susan McLeary keeps her creative imagination alive by continually pursuing new work, new techniques and new ideas

TEXT BY DEBRA PRINZING
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Floral artist Susan McLeary speaks with hard-won confidence about her journey from feeling unrecognized to receiving global attention for her one-of-a-kind wearable botanicals. In retrospect, the self-described "late bloomer" realizes that her childhood love of drawing and gathering bits of nature from the woods of Michigan provided the necessary foundation for her present role as creative director of Ann Arbor, Michigan-based Passionflower.

Susan is a collaborative individual as an artist, designer and educator, known for her unique, boundary-pushing florals that include elaborate headpieces, flower crowns and her signature succulent jewelry. Her exquisite, seasonally-inspired creations and floral wearables are often described as living artwork.

Today, she is a popular workshop teacher and wedding-event designer. But only a decade ago, she was a production florist cranking out wrist corsages and everyday orders, yearning to pursue a more artistic approach to her floristry.

She has an inner drive for personal excellence, an innate curiosity about experimentation and the support from a community of fellow creatives -- attributes that have nurtured her personal and professional growth as a floral artist.



“I realized, there is no time to waste. If you feel something strongly, you have to act on it.”

In the late 1990s, Susan was in her mid-twenties and studying physiology at Eastern Michigan University ("I was always into yoga," she says by way of explaining the decision.)

Susan was also interested in fashion and jewelry, designing and selling beaded and wire-work earrings, necklaces and "Cleopatra-esque" collars through a boutique in her college town. Her path to floral artistry wasn't clear until 2002 when a friend commissioned some of Susan's jewelry for her wedding. "She ran out of time and a budget to hire a florist and asked me to design her flowers," Susan recalls "She basically said, 'you're crafty, you could probably do this.'"

That was the pivotal moment when Susan put physiology behind her and pivoted one-hundred percent to a floral life. "When I was designing those wedding flowers it was like a very cheesy light-bulb moment where I just had a permanent grin on my face. I thought, 'why am I feeling so good?' I knew I was creative, but I didn't really know how to express it. I was very fortunate that happened. I became obsessed from that moment with finding out everything I could to become a floral designer."

Susan became the go-to florist for all of her friends' weddings during the course of a few years. "Each time, I gifted my labor and the bride bought the flowers; I practiced my skills on their weddings."

Susan pursued a floral design certificate offered by the Michigan Floral Association and volunteered to assist one of her instructors, European-trained Dorota Knobloch, whose avant-garde wedding florals and large-scale event work inspired her imagination. "I was absorbing everything I could find," Susan recalls.

She also joined an area flower shop as a production florist handling every type of order for proms, funerals, weddings and daily deliveries. It was an intense, high-volume experience that gave Susan a fluency with skills like proposals, floral mechanics and production deadlines.

By October 2010, Susan made the leap to go solo. "That was my first time jumping and not having a job and being okay with it," she says. Around the same time, Susan's father became ill and she looks back on the difficult experience as one that gave her the courage to pursue an artistic life on her own terms.

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Susan launched Passionflower, surprising herself more than her family and friends with the bold move. "I just couldn't find anyone with the level of passion that I had. Really, it sounds so nerdy, but I'm obsessed. I can't help it. Floral design is my passion. It's my work. It's huge to me."

Her studio was a 400-square-foot corner of a wine warehouse home to her husband's company. She equipped it with a floral cooler and supplies purchased from two florists who were moving out of state. "Everything was lining up for me, even though I didn't feel ready at all."



With a young daughter, it was a relief to be in charge of her own schedule and focus on weddings and events. "I reached out to event planners and to other designers; I offered to take on freelance work if they needed it. I think I booked 25 weddings the first year and that grew to 35 or 40 weddings the following year."

Susan struggled with having enough confidence about her floral vision to avoid making conventional florals that many customers asked for, even though she "tried to steer people toward seasonal ingredients and more interesting flowers."

She credits joining Chapel Designers, a collective of wedding and event florists led by Holly Chapple, and attending her first Chapel Designers Conference in 2013 as a significant turning point. "I had been searching for my people, those who were as obsessed as I am. When I met other Chapel Designers I found peers who were extremely passionate small business owners like me. It was the first time I



met designers who were going through exactly what I was going through and striving for excellence in their work. There is just a level of quality, a commitment to pushing this industry forward, in the group."

Having a safe and supportive place to experiment and share her creativity propelled Susan to a level of confidence she hadn't previously felt. Chapel Designers' conferences exposed Susan "to people who approach floral design as art and not as a product," including teachers like Ariella Chezlar, Francoise Weeks, David Beahm and Holly Chapple.

"I loved that they weren't traditionally trained. I respect both paths, but I especially love the mad-scientist-self-trained-art-student who picks up flowers as the medium. I'm obsessed with that. It turns everything on its head, like a Dutch painting where the big bloom is on top and the little ones are down there, which doesn't make sense, but is gorgeous."

"I've had to get over being self-conscious and I had to get over the fact that nobody's going to find me randomly. I have to put myself out there and I have to promote myself,"

Two additional opportunities to study with Portland, Oregon-based Francoise Weeks (featured in the September 2016 issue of *Florists' Review*), inspired Susan to reconnect with her prior life as a jewelry-maker. "I was reminded about my whole interest in fashion," she says. "I realized that now I was a florist whose skills met my interests. It felt right to combine them. I started experimenting more; I brought out my jewelry case and all my tools -- it just came full circle for me."

Her fresh, contemporary style began as a problem-solving challenge, Susan explains. "I had to figure out how to send my floral jewelry from Michigan to California in January and I was worried whether the pieces would last if I used berries and flowers. There wasn't a lot of other material available, so I made the jewelry with succulents and they shipped beautifully."

The reaction on social media to her succulent jewelry was so dramatic that Susan knew she had something special -- and it inspired her to expand her business, adding an online Etsy Shop (Passionflower Made) through which she has sold nearly 600 pieces

of succulent-based jewelry, boutonnieres and floral crowns, as well as commissions.

Susan continues to design and produce beautiful weddings and large-scale installations. She is an in-demand teacher for one-on-one or small-group tutorials geared toward fellow florists who want to learn her signature style, mechanics and techniques. She fully embraces her creativity with a mix of confidence, curiosity and excitement.

"I've had to get over being self-conscious and I had to get over the fact that nobody's going to find me randomly. I have to put myself out there and I have to promote myself," Susan says.





HERE ARE SOME OF HER INSIGHTS FOR **NURTURING AND SUSTAINING CREATIVITY:**

SCHEDULE FOR CREATIVITY:

"You have to be insanely curious and you have to keep your curiosity," she insists. Rather than waiting for the muse to miraculously appear, Susan is ever-attentive and observant, seeking inspiration from many sources. This practice is especially important in light of the myriad distractions that invade the creative process, she says.

"The life of a florist is very busy and there isn't a lot of free time. But my advice is to make creative time a priority. Schedule a day, or part of a day, each month, and try out new ideas. Create just for yourself. Make the things that you want to make and be sure to have them photographed. Make it a priority."

DESIGN WITHOUT BOUNDARIES:

"Not all of these creative periods will produce successful designs, but I strongly believe that these play periods are essential for growth. They can stoke the creative fire," Susan says. She keeps a sketch book on hand and has multiple Pinterest boards for storing ideas. It is these collections of concepts Susan refers to when seeking inspiration for a

photo shoot or entering a design contest.

DOCUMENT EVERYTHING:

"If you can put quality images of your work out into the world, images of things you would really like to be doing regularly, people will start to react."

She speaks from experience. "I wasn't making things I wanted to make; I was filling orders for my business. But when I began blasting photographs of my work out into the universe, people started reacting to my work for the first time."

One way to achieve this goal is to piggyback the experimental design work on existing work, she advises. "I may say 'Yes' to a photo shoot that already has a number of requirements to meet, such as a theme and a mood. I fill those requirements but I also take the opportunity when I have extra flowers in the studio, and time to create, to make pieces that I want photographed, perhaps after the planned work is shot."

INVEST IN THE BEST:

Photography should be the number one investment you make, Susan says. "So many florists make beautiful things,

but they don't take the time and effort to get their work professionally photographed. I've been really lucky. I've had a lot of press, but I think it's because of the consistent, good-quality images I provide. I owe a lot to my photographers who have done this for me. I've paid people. I've traded, and now I have a Amanda Dumouchelle, who does a lot for me. She enjoys shooting things that are out of the box. We're in Ann Arbor where there aren't many opportunities to do editorial work, so I keep it interesting for her.

SAY YES TO OPPORTUNITIES:

Susan says her penchant for experimentation (basically, her hands don't rest if flowers are within reach), has opened her up to surprising experiences. "Two years ago, after Francoise Weeks's headpiece tutorial at Florabundance Design Days, a few of the students and I were messing around, making little rings and things from the leftovers. The photographers covering the conference saw mine and said, 'We have a shoot coming up; would you send us some pieces?' I said 'Yes,' because you don't know when

you're going to get those great opportunities. Another time, I went to Chapel Designers and I made a little succulent ring for Naomi de Manana, an editor at Martha Stewart Weddings, which she then posted on Instagram."

PROMOTE INTENTIONALLY:

Susan thought her succulent jewelry pieces were cute, but she didn't expect the strong, positive reaction her style has engendered. "People reacted like crazy. My first succulent jewelry pieces were originally published in the photographers' 'Look Book.' Then (British designer) Joseph Massie reached out to me and said, 'I saw the succulent jewelry you've been making and I think it's genius' -- and I was shocked. He ended up interviewing me for an article in Fusion Flowers. Now, I'm the succulent lady," she laughs.

Armed with great photography of her succulent jewelry, Susan shared it further. She hired a pitch writer to help her craft language for a public relations-outreach effort. "I sent the images out to every editor and blogger who I thought might be interested. Not many people responded, but I feel like many shared those images

because they are floating around in many places. Recently, the photographs have showed up in major blogs like Refinery 29, Bored Panda and Buzzfeed -- and that exposure directly led to sales via the Etsy Shop."

STAY FRESH:

Feed the creative hunger inside yourself. "When I'm contacted for an article or a blog post, if I possibly can I try to produce new work and exceed expectations. I don't want to give the media a folder of old images that have already circulated. This attitude has paid me back every time when I've invested in new work and new photography."

The images seen here are ones Susan produced in late January, specifically for Florists Review. Photographed by Amanda Dumouchelle and featuring some of her favorite local models, this series features a new palette, new flowers, and new shapes. "I love wearables; I love bouquets; I love large installations. Some of these ideas are a couple of years old, but as I go along my path, I pick up new ones and they layer on top of each other and become new things."

SHARE KNOWLEDGE:

"I love teaching a range of topics, from making a cascade bouquet without foam to large-scale installations. I obviously benefit from sharing information and since I'm a teacher, I get paid for it. But I love to help people, too. Francoise Weeks and I talk about this all the time, about keeping or sharing our intellectual property. It feels so much better when you let (your creativity) out into the world. I believe that if you do, more will return to you. If you hold it in, you're holding so tight that you can't absorb new information."

AVOID NEGATIVITY:

"Sometimes I just have to get off social media, just because I still compare myself so much," Susan confides. "I notice that my work isn't necessarily always on-trend. But it's what I like. I'm trying really hard not to listen to statements like 'flower crowns aren't cool.' I dislike that attitude. Or: 'succulents are out' -- how can a whole plant class be not cool anymore? They're beautiful. I try to listen for what I'm craving."

ABOUT THESE DESIGNS:



Crescent Bouquet

"This shape is in response to the popularity of the overstuffed, spilling bouquets we're seeing now, which I adore. But I'm hungry for a more spare arrangement that highlights negative space in addition to positive. The bouquet is light and holds just a few stems of each variety, but the loose, sprawling arrangement of them provides drama and movement."

Ingredients include mostly American-grown botanicals: ranunculus, lady slipper orchids, hellebores, Mokara orchids, myrtle (*Lophomyrtus* sp.), heuchera foliage, chocolate cosmos, passionflower vine, grape hyacinth (*Muscari*), lilac and rose sumac.



Bib Necklace

This lovely collar piece includes the same floral palette as my three-way floral sash, attached to a vinyl necklace template.



Three-way Floral Sash

"This is a versatile floral adornment that can be worn on the body in multiple ways. We photographed it for the hair, the shoulder and at the waist." The flowers are attached to a vinyl template and include grape hyacinth (*Muscari*), brunia, delphinium, astrantia, Mokara orchids, Phalaenopsis orchids, myrtle (*Lophomyrtus* sp.), blushing bride protea, hyacinth buds, hellebore buds, Dusty Miller and rose sumac.



Dramatic Headpiece

Arranged on a festival headdress base with vinyl fabric extensions, the headpiece is fashioned from astilbe, hydrangea, clematis foliage, cotinus blooms, begonia, rice flower, stock, champagne currants, heuchera blooms, Banksia 'Hookeriana', ornamental raspberry and yarrow.



FIND SUSAN AT THESE SOCIAL PLACES:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/passionflowersue/>
Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/passionflowersue/>
Pinterest: <https://www.pinterest.com/passionflowera2/>
Etsy: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/Passionflowerevents>

STUDIO INTENSIVES:

Susan McLeary offers one-on-one/small group floral intensives for hobbyists, professional florists, and farmer-florists, focusing on the topics that each student needs most. "When I started out as a florist, the class offerings were incredibly dated, and I had to learn the long, hard way. Because of this, I focus only on current styles, updated techniques, and the best of the tips and tricks I've learned over the years."

Pricing: \$130/hour per student, plus materials; \$800 for one-on-one day rate
<http://www.passionflowerevents.com/studio-intensives/>

STUDY WITH SUSAN MCLEARY:

April 23, 2017 – April 25, 2017
Whidbey Island Flower Workshop, Langley, Washington

This flower workshop and creative retreat will focus on innovative, updated trends in floral creations and event styling. Join an inspiring escape on Whidbey Island designed to recharge your business as well as your creative juices, with Susan McLeary of Passionflower and others at a cozy Pacific Northwest winery. This design getaway is designed to help you develop your creative voice, refine and update your floral skills, perfect your tablescaping game, and gain hands-on experience creating a large floral installation without foam.

Sourcing, pricing, tackling creative challenges, staying renewed and inspired, working with local flower farms, and more, will be covered.

Each student will have hands-on experience and all student work will be professionally photographed with professional models for use in portfolios, websites and branding. All florals are locally-sourced or American grown product, including an abundance of varieties from Whidbey Island flower farms.

Pricing: \$1,900 Details and registration: <https://tobeynelson.com/workshops/whidbey-island-flower-workshop/>



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