



Floral design by Sylvia Lukach, Cape Lily



Design by Blue Jasmine Floral



Photo by Christian Oth Studio



An insider's glimpse at what it's like to be a florist in New York City, and survival tips for florists doing business there.

DOING BUSINESS IN THE BIG APPLE

By **Debra Prinzing, PFCI**

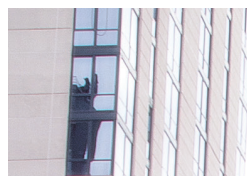
We all know what a workout weddings can be, but New York City weddings are understood to be an entirely different type of workout. As they say, "If I can make it there ..." *right?*

There's a cachet to producing florals for a New York wedding or event, which may make it worth the drain on a florist's time, budget and patience. "Just count on extra labor costs, traffic, parking – these are costs that clients don't really see," says Fairfield, Conn.-based **Carrie Wilcox, of Carrie Wilcox Floral Design**. Doing business in Manhattan takes a skills set that includes ingenuity, inventiveness and intrepidity to succeed, so I talked with several florists about the specific challenges – and joys – about doing business in the city.

Flower Shopping on West 28th Street

Cape Lily's Sylvia Lukach sums up her relationship with New York's wholesale flower district this way: "It's the best of times and the worst of times."

Despite logistical challenges, fighting for a parking space, and the 40-minute commute from her studio



New York Flower District, courtesy of G. Page

(Below) Three New York weddings designed by Carrie Wilcox of Carrie Wilcox Floral Design.



in Montebello, N.Y., **Gloria B. Collins** feels fortunate to shop at the Flower District, which is on West 28th Street, between Sixth and Seventh avenues, in the city's eclectic Chelsea neighborhood. "Others are driving here from Philadelphia," she points out.

The Flower District offers the most exciting selection of ever-changing varieties, with anything available to order, Lukach says. "But with floral wholesalers being pushed out by hotel [and condominium] construction, the future feels bleak."

Things have been changing there for the past decade, Collins acknowledges. "It used to be blocks of wholesalers, and now we're down to one block." Still, she believes that nothing compares with the in-person flower shopping experience, which she prefers over online flower ordering.

G. Page Wholesale Flowers, Dutch Flower Line and **A Rose by Harvest**, three of the most integral players in the district, announced their merger in January. The new unified company, **New York Flower Group**, is expected to move to new premises in the future, which prompts Lukach to predict, "That split will leave the rest to follow."

To navigate her floral buying, Lukach tries to arrive in the Flower District by 6 a.m. and wrap up her shopping before 8 a.m., avoiding parking fines. "It's always a rushed buying frenzy, which, sadly, can ruin the experience for me."

Despite this, the staff at most wholesale outlets "are all great and very helpful getting things to your car or attaching branches to the roof," she adds. "For newbies, take the time to get to know people's names, ask intelligent questions and build relationships. Don't start





(Left) New Jersey-grown flowers for local florists
Photos courtesy Garden State Flower Cooperative



out asking for discounts; it's viewed as insulting."

Collins echoes this advice. "Having a good relationship with my wholesalers is major. I treat [staff] respectfully, and I care about them. I often come in with doughnuts or bagels to let them know I appreciate the fact that they go out of their way for me."

Because of the changing landscape on West 28th Street, some designers are opting to source their flowers in other ways. Wilcox says buying direct from **Holex Flower**, the Dutch flower export company, "has changed my life because I can buy right from the auction." Wilcox finds most of the same varieties can be drop-shipped to **East Coast Wholesale Flowers** in Norwalk, Conn., then delivered to her studio within a predetermined delivery window. "It allows me to obtain high-quality florals without getting up at 4 a.m. to drive into the city," she notes.

Wilcox is equally devoted to her relationship with local flower growers during farming season, citing **Kristin Burrello** of **Muddy Feet Flower Farm** in Ashford, Conn., as her go-to source for *Dahlia*, especially quantities of the 'Café au Lait' variety.

"Kristin and I have built a trusting relationship and have become friends, so she delivers to me on her way to sell at a local farmers' market," Wilcox says, noting that delivery cinches the deal. "I can't always spend the extra time out of my day to pick up flowers from a farm."

Move-In / Move-Out / Deliveries / Parking

The real-estate frenzy in NYC has also eviscerated nearby parking lots, which floral customers used to use when shopping on 28th Street. This, plus the ever-congested streets leading to the flower district, have deterred many longtime buyers from shopping the district in person.

"It's a nightmare," Lukach says. "It's best to have two people in the car. If not, get to know parking spots, pay for parking garages and factor the cost of all of this – and the probability of fines – into your budget. It's just the cost of doing business in the city."

Make it a habit to run out to the curb to "top up the meters during events," or use parking apps where possible, she suggests.

For the past two years, Wilcox has limited her list of New York wedding venues to "outer areas" like Chelsea or the High Line district, which she feels have easier load-in and less traffic. She likes Tribeca Rooftop and The High Line Hotel for these reasons.

"I made the business decision to not do weddings in midtown Manhattan anymore because the drop-offs are so crazy," Wilcox says, recalling a disastrous wedding at the Metropolitan Club, located off Central Park. "There was a tiny hallway, then a holding room, then a tiny elevator to the 12th floor that I had to fight with all the other vendors to use. Then we had to go through the kitchen to load in. And five hours later, we did that all again to strike," she recalls. Wilcox and her crew didn't finish until 2:30 a.m. after the wedding. When they went to pick up their van, they discovered the Pope was visiting New York City the following day and the streets were all shut down. "I thought we were going to have to sleep on the sidewalk, but I found a police officer to let us out of the neighborhood," she laughs.

TJ McGrath, lead designer at **Blue Jasmine Floral** in Berkeley Heights, N.J., notes that while many couples love the idea of a Manhattan wedding ceremony, their pocketbooks aren't always

(Below from left) A Blue Jasmine Floral NYC workshop taught by founder and creative director Paulina Nieliwocki and two wedding installations by the studio



as large as their aspirations. "That bride who wants a nice wedding but can't afford New York City is looking at places outside the city. We're doing three Hudson Valley weddings this year and not one in the city," he says. "We're also booking New York brides who are choosing historic properties and landmark venues near us, such as the restored Natirar Mansion, which accommodates weddings with up to 350 guests."

Then there are the New York couples on a budget who think hiring a florist based outside Manhattan will save them money. McGrath quickly challenges this misconception, pointing out that the cost of flowers, labor and logistics is basically the same for any florist. "We love flowers, and we try to devote as much money to the flower budget as possible."

Like many, **Emily Thompson**, owner of **Emily Thompson Flowers** in New York's SoHo neighborhood, is concerned about the volume of waste produced by weddings and events – and she's been working to address this in her studio and with clients. "We're committed to consciously constantly reducing our reliance on single-use plastics, continuously finding ways that our vases and all the hard goods we use can be recycled or donated. It is our mission to compost 100 percent of our event and studio waste."

Recently, she has also collaborated with **Garbage Goddess** to compost event waste. Profiled by *The New York Times*, Garbage Goddess was created by **Liza Lubell** of **Peartree**, a New York-based florist working toward zero-waste floral events in New York City, the Hamptons and Los Angeles.

Thompson tells planners that composting is a studio policy, "and that cost is going to be reflected in our work."

She adds, "I'm very proud about our composting levels, but that hasn't always been true. Our activism here is not

a question of shaming others who struggle with this issue. What I'm trying to show is the complexity of sustainable goals, particularly in a place like New York City where sanitation is famously political and fraught. There are so many ways in which we have so much improvement to do here. It's a value we discuss with our clients, and we've had a uniformly positive response."

Sourcing Locally-Grown Flowers

Product from larger local growers like **Battenfeld's Anemone Farm** in Red Hook, N.Y., and **H.J. Hautau & Sons** in Branchville, N.J., a greenhouse grower serving the floral trade since the early 1900s, can be found at numerous wholesalers on West 28th Street. Lukach notes that **28th Street Wholesale Flowers** "is starting to stock smaller local farms like Hudson Valley-based **Allora Farm & Flowers**, which is exciting!"

Among other things, Lukach views transportation as the top challenge for moving flowers grown in the regions outside Manhattan into the city. "Local flower farms all operate independently and differently. They typically send out an availability list one week in advance and require minimums in order to deliver. The main routes deliver to Brooklyn, so that can be tricky if you're not on the route. But it's always worth asking," she says.

In 2019, two regional flower-farm wholesale hubs emerged to serve florists and their clients just outside Manhattan, in part driven by demand for local product. **Connecticut Flower Collective** comprises more than 20 local growers who sell direct to florists every Wednesday, May to October, from a location in Branford, Conn. Florists purchase a buyer's card for a \$100 annual fee and receive weekly availability lists for ordering in advance. Other Connecticut pickup locations are also available.

(Below) Floral design by Sylvia Lukach, Cape Lily



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Florists can buy New Jersey-grown flowers, foliage and seasonal items through **Garden State Flower Cooperative**, which sells product from nine area flower farms. It's open each Wednesday from April to October at a location in Morristown, N.J., and also charges a \$100 annual buyer's fee.

"Florists and designers can pre-order items or shop the floor on market day," says **Patricia Kraemer-Doell**, of **Little Big Farm** in Blairstown, N.J., one of the founders. "While, at this point, we do not deliver into the city, it may be something we will offer in the future if there is enough demand."

For Blue Jasmine Floral in New Jersey, the distance to Manhattan is only 22 miles but can take as long as 90 minutes to drive each direction. That's one reason why McGrath is grateful for the new Garden State Flower Co-op. "It saves us money from going into New York City, and we love supporting New Jersey flower farms," he says.

Vendor / Venue Relationships

Like anywhere else, veteran florists say it's important to develop in-person relationships with event planners and coordinators, especially at venues where you work or want to work. "I try to get work at venues I like through external planners and then build on my relationships with those venues," Lukach says. "I've learned to be specific and intentional about who I want to work with. It's a numbers game in a big city like New York. The more time you invest in building relationships and networking, the more you'll get out of it."

Wilcox estimates that a large majority of her business comes from wedding planners with whom she has relationship. She values being on preferred vendor lists and works to show her loyalty.

"Those planners know I'll go the extra mile to make the client happy. I tell my team that if the planner, someone from her team or the client asks us to whip up an extra boutonniere at the last minute, do it with a smile!"

One reward is that many Manhattan wedding clients often tip their florists. It may typically be a few hundred dollars, but "it was mind-blowing to recently receive a very generous tip," Wilcox acknowledges, while also recalling all the extra work she did to make sure those wedding flowers were amazing. ■

DETAILS

A Rose by Harvest, @arosebyharvest
Allora Farm & Flowers, @alloraflowers
Battenfeld's Anemone Farm, anemones.com
Blue Jasmine Floral, bluejasminedesign.com, @bluejasminefloral
Cape Lily, capelily.com, @capelily
Carrie Wilcox Floral Design, cariwilcoxfloraldesign.com, @cwfloraldesign
Connecticut Flower Collective, ctflowercollective.com, @ctflowercollective
Dutch Flower Line, dutchflowerline.com, @dutchflowerline
East Coast Wholesale Flowers, eastcoastwholesaleflowers.com, @eastcoastwholesaleflower
Emily Thompson Flowers, emilythompsonflowers.com, @emilythompsonflowers
G. Page Wholesale Flowers, gpage.com, @gpageflowers
Garbage Goddess, garbagegoddess.com, @garbage.goddess
Garden State Flower Cooperative, gardenstateflowercoop.com, @gardenstateflowercoop
Gloria B. Collins, gloriabcollins.com, @gloriabcollins
H.J. Hautau & Sons, @hautau_and_sons
Holox Flower, holox.com, @holoxusa, @flowersfromholland, @beautywithflowers
Little Big Farm, littlebigfarm.com, @littlebigfarm
Muddy Feet Flower Farm, muddyfeetfarm.com, @muddyfeetflowers
Pear Tree, pearreeflowers.com, @pearreeflowers