

Designer's Choice

With uncertain times come many ways to adapt and adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are the stories of how seven florists are doing just that.

Valentine's Day was a huge success for **Sellwood Flower Co.**, a retail flower shop located in one of Portland, Oregon's busy pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. It felt like a fitting reward for owner **LauraLee Symes** to hop an airplane for Australia on March 12, where she was to cheer on her husband, **Bill Symes**, as he competed in an international sailing race. Eight hours after landing in Melbourne, they learned that the championship race was canceled, and LauraLee and Bill scrambled to find a flight home.

Back in Portland, **Mary Turner-Luecht**, Sellwood Flower Co.'s manager, worried about the safety of the company's employees. It's impossible to maintain six-foot social distancing in the small shop, and staff felt uncomfortable when customers entered. Turner-Luecht and Symes decided to take only telephone orders and close the front gate to walk-in customers.

Six days later, when Symes made it back to Portland, she thought the most responsible thing to do was close Sellwood Flower Co. and lay off staff, including her manager. "Well, that lasted about three hours," she says. "The phone and the emails were bonkers. I was on the phone the first day I was home for 12 hours straight with customers calling and wanting flowers. They were calling for first responders, for their nurse friends, for family members. People wanted flowers more than I had ever seen them want flowers before - and in such meaningful ways."

Symes had to immediately change how she managed Sellwood Flower Co., and the steps she took have so far saved the business and ensured that Mother's Day was successful.

First, she figured out how to run Sellwood Flower Co. from her kitchen table, where she primarily takes orders. At the store, she created separate indoor and outdoor workstations, allowing for

two designers to work safely when incoming orders are too much for just one designer. By Mother's Day, she figured out a "remote designer" system to employ staff members who had to be home because their children's schools were closed. "They pick up a kit, design our offerings, and then bring the arrangements back for delivery. It's not ideal, but it works," she says. When the delivery service scaled back to once-a-day pickups, Symes started using Uber, and she discovered "a lot of Uber drivers like delivering flowers more than people in some cases."

Each team member has a dedicated shop phone to use for communicating with customers, and Symes raves about the new customer text-messaging app for retailers called **Clientbook**. "That has really made a big difference," she says. "It's personalizes our interactions with customers so we can send them a text message and maybe even a photo of the type of arrangement we're making for them. They just love it."

At the same time she was reimagining operations, Symes also confronted her supply chain. Early on in March, she heard about Oregon farms throwing away flowers because they had no place to sell or distribute crops. "Here it was springtime - the best time of year for flowers in Oregon. I had to find flowers." Symes felt uncomfortable sending employees to procure flowers at the wholesale market as they had previously done. "It's hard being a business owner and thinking about sending your employees someplace where they might be exposed to the coronavirus. I just wanted to do my part to keep people as safe as I could."

She began reaching out directly to farmers, many of whom are part of the **Oregon Flower Growers Association**, which is located at the **Portland Flower Market**. "I decided that I was going to buy from the people who would be willing to bring their



(Left) Mary Turner-Luecht, Sellwood Flower Co.'s manager, gloved and ready for a delivery; (Below) Sellwood Flower Co.'s signature bouquet style; (Bottom left) Team member Lynn Hastings handling orders from her home. Photos courtesy of Sellwood Flower Co.



flowers here and set them outside our gate for no-contact drop-off. There were a few people who jumped at the chance and were so grateful for our business," Symes says. "I'm going to keep doing this." She also established a direct-buying account with a large Oregon flower grower previously not interested in selling to a shop her size.

Ironically, while revenue has disappeared from Sellwood Flower Co.'s corporate accounts (restaurants and country-club orders made up 20 percent of business in the past), sales overall are 23 percent higher than this time last year, Symes says. She attributes some of this to Sellwood Flower Co.'s add-on items that can be delivered with flowers, including local wines, teas and gourmet foods.

"I think this is our new model," Symes observes. "I don't know that I'll reopen as a retail store, at least not any time in the near future. I don't think we can do that safely. I might set up a kiosk outside, though, so people can walk up and use an iPad to order, and we'll bring the flowers right out to them. We'll also keep remotely designing, buying from our local farmers and employing Uber drivers. It's never felt more real and local than it does now, which is kind of ironic."

Details: Sellwood Flower Co., sellwoodflowerco.com,
@sellwoodflowercompany

More Encouraging News

The COVID-19 pandemic hit studio, wedding and event florists quite hard. Anecdotally, everyone I interviewed experienced almost immediate requests to postpone and reschedule ceremonies. The pinch of disappearing revenue has inspired a number of creative solutions. While perhaps not a long-term shift in how wedding and event florists may do business in 2021, here are some of the income-generating ideas you might want to consider.

Create a Buzz in Local Media

Admittedly, **Liz Egan**, of Milwaukee, Wis.-based **Floral Alchemy**, spent a little time mourning the flurry of postponed weddings and events, of which she had about 20 booked this season. "Nobody's canceled outright, but some clients have postponed to this fall, and others moved their dates to 2021," she says. "There was a little bit of triage on my part; a fair amount of handholding and assuring my clients that things are going to be okay."

But was Floral Alchemy going to be okay? Egan discussed canceling her annual Mother's Day flower pop-up with **Colectivo Coffee**, a Milwaukee cafe chain, and the store management urged her to go forward. "They actually reconstructed a cafe for walk-up orders and curbside pickup, so they wanted me there with flowers," she says. Still, as a nonessential business in Wisconsin, Egan could provide only pre-ordered flowers for scheduled pickups, and she had to be inventive to get the word out.

"I did something that I would never in a million years have done before, but all bets seemed to be off with this virus. A friend helped me, and I pitched a local morning show on alternative Mother's Day ideas." Little did Egan know the producers of "Fox6 News WakeUp" were looking for positive small-business stories to feature, and her ideas appealed to them. On the Monday prior to Mother's Day, she hosted the show in her studio for three hours, appearing live for some design segments and recording others with tips on affordable ways to celebrate Mother's Day. This allowed Egan to promote her upcoming coffee shop pop-up and share pre-order details with viewers. "It was very cool, and it gave me confidence," Egan says. "You know, I was out of options, so I told myself that I might as well not be scared – and just go for it."

Next up, Egan is planning on partnering with other small businesses to cross-promote her flowers. "Everyone's kind of in this together and helping each other. Like coffee, flowers are something customers can procure safely. They give a sense of normalcy, and they can make people smile and feel hopeful and more connected, and they can lower blood pressure!"

Details: Floral Alchemy, floridalchemymke.com, @floral_alchemy



(From top) Liz Egan, socially distanced while hosting local television reporter Brian Kramp in her Floral Alchemy studio. Mother's Day bouquets, ready for safe pickup and delivery, complete with care tags. Curb Side Pickup: Signage designed for the COVID era
Photos courtesy of Floral Alchemy



Retail Redux

With 30 or so weddings and corporate events postponed for later this year or into 2021, "the new normal" began to feel more than temporary by early April for **Jimmy Lohr**, CEO of Pittsburgh-based **greenSinner**.

"Normally, my job is being a cheerleader and not to give up hope. I've been having regular conversations with my clients about how over the top their [rescheduled] weddings are going to be. And many are saying, 'Well, now I have another year to save for the wedding of the century.' Even if you have to cut 30 tables because you have a smaller guest count, I'm hearing, 'But I want the biggest flower arch that anyone has ever seen.'"

Long ago, Lohr and his spouse and partner, **Jonathan Weber**, stopped delivering flowers or offering retail hours at their studio. But as Mother's Day approached, they decided to change things.

"At first, it was to give me something to do and to support our local flower arms," Lohr says. "It's absurd how well our customers received this change, which caused us to revisit our business model. I've been buying a ton of plants and doing houseplant deliveries and no-contact floral deliveries. Next, we'll start a curbside pickup service. People can come here, and we'll bring their orders out to the parking lot."

The studio promoted its Mother's Day arrangements through a few sponsored social media posts, and to everyone's surprise, the orders flowed in, keeping four delivery drivers busy and one person at the shop managing pickups. "I was ecstatic with the amount of revenue we achieved," Lohr confides. "It was actually more revenue than the two weddings we had planned for Mother's Day weekend and a hell of a lot less work. It was so weird. We closed everything at three o'clock, and when we got home, I was tired – in a good way."

Lohr says he's paying for the impact of COVID-19 on greenSinner's wedding operations because "even though we're not producing events, we're still having to deal with the administration of those [postponed] events. So I still have

(Left) CEO (Chief Eccentric Officer) Jimmy Lohr and the team at Pittsburgh's greenSinner have reimagined their wedding and events floral enterprise into a beautiful source for local, everyday flowers that are anything but ordinary; (Bottom, from left) greenSinner's Rose Kocher, appropriately masked, shows off a massive burro's tail, one of the many unique varieties in the online shop; a seasonal vase arrangement, with pricing beginning at \$75 plus delivery. Photos © Sky's the Limit Photography

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our client communicator dealing with millions of emails."

On the other hand, while greenSinner produced 200 events in 2019, Lohr thinks about the 80 proposals he wrote that didn't sign with his studio. "That's 80 hour-and-a-half-long meetings, plus a good proposal takes me about a day to write. So I'm actively thinking about how to change my business model. I always get mad at people obsessing about quality of life. And now I think, maybe it's not quality of life; it's just *awareness* of life. So many of us have been living our businesses. But let's change the rules."

For Lohr, a return to retail means a different kind of retail. It means creating a way for wedding and event clients to connect in person with him and greenSinner's design team. The six weddings he's booked since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic have left him with a better feeling about the future. "Most of those clients have now called us to send flowers to their moms, or Mom sent herself flowers. We now have the opportunity to really connect – to actually make flowers be part of people's lives again."

For Lohr and Weber, reimagining greenSinner in a post-pandemic environment is an exhilarating thought. It means offering "designer's choice" arrangements, communicating the seasonality of each bouquet or vase that leaves the studio.

"We want to bring back some magic," Lohr says. "You get to pick the price point. We'll show you some inspirational photos, but it's designer's choice, and we'll help you celebrate what's growing locally."

Details: greenSinner, greensinner.com, @greensinner





The spacious greenhouse at Starry Fields Farm is now a new source of revenue for the Broyles family, as a small-wedding destination. The flowers are grown and designed by Jessica Broyles.
Photos © Mayo Photography

From Flower Farm to Wedding Venue

Farmer-florist **Jessica Broyles**, of **Starry Fields Farm** in Bowling Green, Ky., markets a seasonal bouquet subscription service and sells hand-tied bouquets and arrangements for pickup or delivery through her online shop. In past years, Starry Fields' customers could pick up their flowers at the local farmers' market, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, Broyles decided to convert all of her customers to delivery orders. "It's roughly the same amount of time for me to deliver twice a week, since otherwise, I'm at the farmers' market for six hours on a Saturday," she points out. "Plus, when you cut flowers and go sit at the farmers' market, you're just hoping your flowers will sell. This way, what I deliver I've already sold, so I'm not wasting my time or losing product. I sold out every week in April, typically two weeks ahead of time. It's blowing my mind." Broyles believes that her pricing reflects what her community and customers will bear: from \$20 market bouquet to centerpieces ranging from \$35 to \$100."

Starry Fields' on-farm design workshops are popular and typically take place inside the 750-square-foot custom greenhouse that **Ryan Broyles** built from vintage and recycled windows. In the past, they have also rented the charming structure as a backdrop for portraits or engagement sessions. This spring, the greenhouse was converted to a micro-wedding venue.

It started when the Broyles let one couple from their church say their vows before an officiant with only parents in attendance.

"The photographer who came told me, 'You have to do more of this,'" Broyles says. But the greenhouse didn't have a permanent floor, "so Ryan started right away to build a wide-plank floor that we stained gray, like barn wood," she says. "It's gorgeous."

Promoting Starry Fields Farm as an alternate small-wedding destination has taken off, with numerous local couples securing dates during Broyles' launch of venue-plus-personal-flowers for \$500. After the first promotion, that price will probably increase to \$1,000, and flowers will be separate, she says.

"One bride told me she had planned to rent a tent for a wedding on her family farm, but it was going to cost \$700. I realized, okay, we're way better than a tent."

Never having hosted weddings on her farm prior to this season, Broyles originally kept her rates quite affordable. But with a planned styled shoot on the calendar, complete with models and a floral installation, she expects that the "micro-wedding in a greenhouse" will take off. And when shelter-in-place restrictions end in her state, Broyles has more plans, including resuming her on-farm workshops and possibly opening the farm for you-pick visits.

Details: Starry Fields Farm, starryfieldsflowers.com, @jessica_starryfieldsfarm

Front-porch Pop-up

Like a personal chef, **Evelyn Frolking**, of **Studio Artiflora** in Granville, Ohio, primarily serves the everyday floral needs of local clients in a college town of 4,000 people, located east of Columbus. Her studio is focused on small, personal affairs and special occasions.

She has a special love for tulips, inspired by her time teaching English and later studying for a certificate in Dutch floral design at the **Boerma Institute of Dutch Floral Design** in the Netherlands. Last fall, Frolking planted 400 tulips in her cutting garden.

"My plan was that these tulips were going to bloom successively over six weeks or so and that I would use them in my studio and for Mother's Day. As it turns out, my business really dropped off when the state closed down. Here it was, end of March-early April, and my tulips started coming on by the hundreds."

Frolking first made petite bouquets to donate to healthcare workers. "I made about 30 of them, but I still had a lot of tulips. So I set up a pop-up shop on my front porch. The days were really cool, perfect for my flower stand. I posted to Facebook that I was having a tulip pop-up, and on the first day, within 20 minutes, I sold more than 140 tulips."

Friends, neighbors and complete strangers paid via the honor system, dropping bills into a jar or paying for the \$10 bunches on Venmo. "I stood on the other side of my front door and held a big thank-you sign - and waved. I don't think anyone purchased just one bunch of tulips. They just loaded up, and off they went. It was really amazing."

Frolking held four pop-up sales on her front porch, and moved all 400 tulips. She covered her costs and made about 30 percent profit, which surprised her. In the midst of her community's shelter-in-place climate, Frolking reflected on the way flowers boosted people's moods, writing about it in a guest column for her community newspaper. "I wrote about resilience and how, perhaps, something as simple as a tulip could improve our morale," she says.

With her Mother's Day floral sales bringing in more than twice past years' revenue, Frolking is already thinking about how many tulips she'll plant this fall - for next spring's harvest. "Ubiquitous as the bloom may be, it holds special meaning to me, and in sharing it, in my psyche, I hearken back to my Dutch life. I'm planning to do more than just plant tulips," she says. "I'm looking for special varieties that are really stunning."

Details: Studio Artiflora, artifloragranville.com, @artifloragranville



(Top photo) Evelyn Frolking's pop-up tulip shop served neighbors and supporters who learned about the blooms when she posted about the "sale" in a neighborhood Facebook group.

(Bottom right) Frolking spent last fall planting 400 tulips in her Granville, Ohio, garden.

Photos courtesy of Studio Artiflora

Wearing the Marketing Hat

Rebekah Mindel, of **Meadow Wilds**, is a farmer-florist based in New York's Hudson Valley, where she grows cut flowers on about one-third acre, supplying 70 percent of the botanicals in her wedding designs.

"I grow flowers with colors that I like and that I know I'm going to need," Mindel says. "I grow a lot of white. I also try to grow peachy-pinks, mauves and other light earthy colors. And burgundies. I try to make sure I have a variety of fillers, focal flowers and greenery in the field. Then, when the wedding comes up, I'll use anything from my field that works within my palette."

In addition to weddings, for five years Mindel has sold bouquets through **Sunflower Natural Foods** in Woodstock, N.Y. She also supplies bouquets through food and produce CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) operated by other farms. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mindel mostly used the CSA customer base established by the larger farms. However, since the pandemic, when most of her wedding clients postponed and future sales outlets became uncertain, something shifted in her thinking. She decided that she needed a new plan for how to sell her flowers. Because she leases land from **High Falls Farm**, a regional orchard and biodynamic operation, Mindel went to her friends and landlords first and suggested: "We have to have a farm stand. We have to bring people to this farm to sell to them."

The owners agreed, and they spent the spring constructing a farm stand, which will stock Meadow Wilds' bouquets, as well as mushrooms and produce grown on the land. She began promoting the *"Hudson Valley Flower Share (CSA): Lush seasonal florals grown at our farm – grown by seed, cultivated by hand and artfully arranged in-house by floral designer Rebekah Mindel."* The \$250 subscription includes 12 weeks of bouquets throughout the season.

More comfortable growing and designing with flowers than selling them, this "new normal" era has prompted Mindel to overcome her hesitancy to market her designs. Before Mother's Day, she polled followers on social media, asking who wanted local flowers. Reassuring responses led to Mindel's efforts to develop new outlets for her flowers. "It feels different. People's mind-sets have shifted as they're now saying, 'I want to support local small farms.' It also seems like flowers have never been more important for the well being of all," Mindel adds.

Details: Meadow Wilds, meadowwilds.com, @meadowwilds

(This page, top) Farmer-florist Rebekah Mindel, of Meadow Wilds in New York's Hudson Valley. *Photos © Teresa Horgan Photography*
(Bottom) A Meadow Wilds' bridal bouquet in Mindel's preferred palette. *Photos © Alicia King Photography*

(Opposite page from top) Maple + Mum's Kate Brunson and Nancy Hilton posed in front of their eye-catching flower truck; Locally-grown flowers from the farmers of the Connecticut Cut Flower Collective are safely sold to area florists. Kate Brunson, the market manager, is pictured second from left; A seasonal Maple + Mum bouquet, delivered "no contact" to a front porch in Brunson and Hilton's Connecticut neighborhood.





Mobilizing Their Marketplace

Kate Brunson and **Nancy Hilton** are the daughter and mother behind **Maple + Mum**, a Branford, Conn.-based wedding and event studio that sources local and seasonal flowers as often as possible. For the second year, this approach has been made easier by Brunson's second role as market manager for the emerging **Connecticut Cut Flower Collective**, a May-through-October weekly cut flower market where more than 20 area growers sell their crops to local florists. "This job gets me much closer to all the flowers," she says.

But with a wedding season set to start the second week of April, Brunson and Hilton watched as most of their spring to fall 2020 ceremonies began to migrate to 2021. Brunson says she's become a big fan of the hashtag campaign to support small businesses: *#rescheduledontcancel*.

"For the most part, deposits are getting applied to the same weddings on different dates," she explains. "We have a handful [of weddings] left that are still on the books for 2020, but I'm moving forward thinking, 'Okay, we could have not one wedding at all.'"

A few years ago, Maple + Mum renovated a delivery truck and converted it into a mobile flower shop. "We got the truck because we were doing weddings for couples who didn't live near us, and we wanted a way to connect with people closer to where we live," Brunson explains. And just like that, Maple + Mum launched local flower deliveries, realizing their truck was one solution to the disappearing wedding dates.

"I knew the Connecticut Flower Collective was going to be open for the first week of May and that all those growers would have wedding-worthy blooms," she says. "I also knew people would appreciate some pick-me-up right now. So we used Mother's Day as a pivot. We sold out for Mother's Day, but then follow-up orders gained traction. People are still interested in sending flowers to cheer up someone or to support a healthcare worker."

Brunson and Hilton launched a flower subscription service and tapped the Connecticut farms to supply flowers for no-contact Friday truck deliveries. Revenue from this program isn't likely to replace a rescheduled wedding, but there are other reasons to continue it, Brunson says.

"I'm keeping our name out there, so the subscription flowers give me something to post on Instagram that reflects our business. Second, delivering flowers is one thing we can do during this time that is just a feel-good part of life. I'm not going to stop using flowers for the next six months! And third, the farmers have become my best friends, and I want to see if we can give them a little bit of business - even if it's ordering 10 bunches of flowers each week. It all feels like the right thing to do. Plus, I need it. It's like therapy."

Details: Maple + Mum Floral Designs, mapleandmum.com, @mapleandmum ■

