



Profile

Friendly Flower Fight

Netflix host and fab floral designer Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht connects with flower fans around the globe.

By **Debra Prinzing, PFCI**

Photography courtesy of **Netflix and Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht**

Just in time for escapist binge-watching during the COVID-19 pandemic, Netflix's *The Big Flower Fight* debuted in late May, instantly capturing the hearts of a nature-starved audience—flower people, gardening types, and families of all ages. In the style of *The Great British Bake Off*, the eight-episode reality series invites 10 pairs of florists, sculptors and garden designers from around the world to a friendly competition for the title "Best in Bloom." In each episode, they're challenged to turn outrageous horticultural assignments into larger-than-life topiaries festooned with flowers and plants.

At the show's heart is head judge **Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht**, a Seattle-based florist and founder of **Wild Bloom**, a wedding and event studio. The past 12 months have been a whirlwind for Griffith-VanderYacht, who says he was discovered and cast as *The Big Flower Fight*'s head judge after

the show producers discovered his Instagram account. As judge and mentor, Griffith-VanderYacht's charm, energy and polychromatic wardrobe keeps everything fun on *The Big Flower Fight*.

I recently met up with Griffith-VanderYacht for an interview, via Zoom, to hear all about his experience, his fascinating path to a flower-filled life and his dreams for the future.

FR: You've had careers in theater, floral design and, now, as a television personality. What were your influences?

KGV: I grew up in Detroit in an incredibly religious home where I felt an outcast in many ways. I felt that I was a disappointment—being gay and being so flamboyant; being ostentatious and loving sparkly things. At the time, I knew I had to get out and find other people like me. For me, joining theater was important. I learned that, "Oh my God, everyone's

like me. I'm not even the weirdest person here. I'm actually pretty basic compared to all those other big personalities." So my influences from an early start were artists.

FR: Tell us about your musical theater career.

KGV: I attended Boston Conservatory, a performing-arts college in Boston. When I was 20, I was cast in the national tour of *Rent*, and then I moved to New York. When *Rent* came along, in many ways, I felt complete. That hole in my heart that needed to be filled was overflowing with love and acceptance. *Rent* was my dream show, and I got to play my dream role, which was Angel. Theater, for me, was always about connecting with people and making a difference in someone's life through a performance. It's the same thing with psychology. It's the same thing with flowers. It's always about trying to give people the inspiration that they need to feel they can conquer whatever issues they're experiencing.

FR: How did you start your floral career?

KGV: I was in graduate school at Columbia University, studying psychology to be a school counselor. In my fieldwork, I was working with middle-school-age children, yet I was thinking about flowers. I realized it wasn't fair to them or me. I interned at this incredible studio called **Sprout Home** in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and learned so much from the head designer, **Doan Ly**. She has a bajillion followers on Instagram because her work is stunning. I couldn't follow her process or what she was doing to make bouquets and centerpieces, but by the end, it was this masterpiece of a design. That's when I realized that it's not about me being able to follow someone else. It's about listening to my own voice because that's what Doan was doing. She was listening to her own voice and adhering to her own taste level, developed over years of experience. Observing her work flow was a turning point for me.

FR: How has your brand evolved as a florist?

KGV: Originally, I was trying to recreate the experience that I had when planning my own wedding to Aaron in June 2013. I picked vendors who had very strong brand identity and perspective as artists. From the cake designer to the lighting team, everyone was very intense in what they were doing. When I started my business, I knew I wanted customers to look at me and have that same experience. Getting published was a major goal of mine when I was starting.

I officially started my floral business in 2013, and it was called **Full Aperture Floral**, but I had been doing flowers since 2011. One of my first big breaks came at a magazine photoshoot. I was running late—imagine me on the train holding these bouquets, as one does in New York City. I ran down the hall holding the bouquets, and I burst through the door of the photoshoot, not knowing it was completely inappropriate for me to do so (sometimes ignorance has helped me in terms of getting over some industry standards). I walked in, and there was a sea of 150 other bouquets sitting on





On location at "The Big Flower Fight"

the studio floor, and the fashion editor looks over at me, and the photographer said, "Bring those in." His name is **Erik Madigan Heck**, and he gave me a seat at the table.

FR: How do you describe your aesthetic?

KGV: My tagline is "artfully-crafted flowers with an editorial eye." I really do spend a lot of time making sure that my arrangements are picture perfect and beautiful from all angles but also that they feel architectural and intentional. That takes making a lot of mistakes and sometimes re-doing and then editing the design.

FR: Tell us about *The Big Flower Fight*.

KGV: The production company and Netflix made a huge effort to involve me in the process of setting all the challenges. *The Big Flower Fight* allowed me to be 100 percent myself. I told them from the beginning that I am not Simon Cowell when it comes to judging. I'm not here to tear anyone down. I'm not here to make sensationalized television. I really want people to grow. I have an immense amount of respect for the creative energy that it takes to make those sculptures, and I don't ever want to question the talents of the contestants. Talent isn't the issue here. They have the talent. My role is to say, "Here's what I'm seeing; here's what I think you can do to make it better."

FR: I felt the show really did have a sustainability message.

KGV: There was no floral foam on the show. I did not come up with the rule, but when the producers suggested it, I said, "Yes, that makes sense. Let's do it."

FR: To what do you credit the show's popularity?

KGV: The producers wanted the show to appeal to a wide range of viewers. They wanted families to watch the show, so much so that the producers would censor us if there was too much innuendo. It is a "clean" show, which is hilarious because I find flowers to be so (ahem) expressive. I actually feel *The Big Flower Fight* is probably more appealing to gardeners than it is to cut-flower lovers because of all the planting that went on during the show.

FR: Were you involved in casting?

KGV: No. For anyone who wonders, I'm not involved in casting. I've gotten probably a thousand messages and emails, so please, do not DM me! Why would you want me to help cast the show? It would be terrible because then I would have a bias.

FR: When can we expect Season Two of *The Big Flower Fight*?

KGV: I hope we get a second season so we can do it again!

That would be great. Right now, what helps is people talking about the show, tweeting and tagging *The Big Flower Fight*. Netflix really cares about the impact the show has on the community. And I'm talking about a global community. They want to know that their shows are reaching people and that people are talking about them.

FR: What can we expect next from Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht and Wild Bloom?

KGV: Right now, my focus is encouragement. More than anything, people want to connect with nature. I liken it to when we're dehydrated, our bodies tell us, "Girl, go get some water." Right now, we're being told to stay inside, don't touch anything—even the air isn't safe. We are craving a connection to nature.

That is so important for our mental health right now.

As my brand continues to grow, I would love to be doing more in the home-and-garden marketplace. I think there is a huge opportunity to have a face like mine encouraging the next generation of florists and designers to pick up a shovel and get some compost. Even if you have just a tiny windowsill, like many of us who live in the city so, it's okay. You don't need an acre of land to put some seeds in a pot.

DETAILS

Kristen Griffith-VanderYacht

Wild Bloom Floral

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