

Fresh Cut


Locally grown native plants are gaining the attention of farmers, floral designers and consumers nationwide

By Andrea Abel

In the first pale light of a late-May Texas Hill Country morning, Pamela and Frank Arnosky and their eldest son, Derrick, have been at work for hours in their packing shed, readying the previous day's harvest for market. The chatter of birds, occasional turkey's gobble and banter of people accustomed to working together punctuate the stillness of the waking day. The Arnoskys are flower farmers with a passionate vision whose diverse crops include a liberal dose of cultivated native wildflowers.



Wildflower Center volunteer floral designer Maggie Livings combined gayfeather (*Liatris mucronata*), wild buckwheat (*Eriogonum annuum*), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), purpletop (*Tridens flavus*) and green sprangletop (*Leptochloa dubia*) in this autumn arrangement.



Texas Specialty Cut Flowers are a labor of love for Pamela and Frank Arnosky of Central Texas' Arnosky Farms. Bundled here for sale to the public in May are flowers grown on 40 of the farm's 128 acres. About a third of the cut flowers grown are native Texans.

Buckets of freshly cut flowers create a color spectrum that fills every corner of the shed. Without losing the rhythm of their work, the couple shares their knowledge gained from 18 years of flower farming and their views on the native wildflower segment of the U.S. floriculture industry.

Like all other segments of the economy, globalization has altered this industry. U.S. sales for retail floriculture posted by the Society of American Florists totaled more than \$20 billion in 2007, with Colombia growing the most imported flowers and California growing the most domestically. South American cut flowers, grown mostly in Colombia and Ecuador, have severely undercut the U.S. market, particularly for roses, carnations and mums – considered to be the industry mainstays.

“Specialty cut flowers have become the most important part of the U.S. cut flower industry,” reports John Dole in the publication “Status of the Specialty Cut Flower Industry and New Crop Development,” noting that domestic specialty cut production totaled \$443 million in 2002. A specialty cut is anything other than the three industry mainstays and is difficult to define since the possibilities are nearly endless.

Dole adds that novel cut flowers such as native species have become increasingly important for U.S. flower farmers to maintain a competitive edge over foreign-grown flowers. Growing and shipping wildflowers has its challenges. The fact that most wildflowers’ fragility won’t let them tolerate packing and shipping like other flowers makes local flowers more attractive to some florists. However, the season for cultivated wildflowers is short since they’re grown in the field rather than in hoop houses or green houses.

Not surprisingly, there have been recent efforts within the floral industry to “go green.” Veriflora is a third-party certifying entity for cut flowers sold in the United States. It evaluates the practices of flower producers based on elements of sustainability that include respect for the environment, economy and social justice, as well as product integrity. The company is “on track to certify 1 billion stems in 2008,” reports

Amy Stewart in her book “Flower Confidential.”

Although there are many newcomers to the trend, some floral designers, retailers and farmers like the Arnoskys have long understood the value of preserving native flowers through their work.

The Arnoskys bought their farm in 1990 and learned about growing cut flowers along the way, aided by Frank’s background in horticulture and their persistence. They got their big break when Central Market, a specialty grocery store owned by H-E-B, opened in 1994, and the Arnoskys started selling their flowers there. Frustrated by the lack of information available for those wanting to enter the specialty cut flower business, the couple began writing a column for “Growing



WILDFLOWER FACT

A cultivated wildflower can be defined as “one that has been brought into cultivation and is growing under human aid or influence,” says Wildflower Center Director of Education and Plant Conservation Flo Oxley. Wildflower cultivars grown on farms and in gardens generally have gone through a selection process where desirable characteristics, such as flower color or long stems, have been isolated and bred.

Making the Cut

Arranging wildflowers at the Wildflower Center

EACH WEEK AT THE WILDFLOWER CENTER, a small but stalwart legion of dedicated volunteers collects and arranges native flowers, grasses, seed heads and pods, and tree branches to create more than 20 floral arrangements displayed throughout the Center’s indoor and outdoor areas.

“We try to take what nature gives us,” says Wanda Lancaster, a longtime Wildflower Center volunteer (pictured at right with volunteers Maggie Livings and Anne Linville) who brings together a rotating trio of volunteers to gather and arrange wildflowers. Some of Lancaster’s favorite plants to use in designs include Texas mountain laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*) and Mexican plum (*Prunus mexicana*) in the spring, native grasses like little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) in the summer, and American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) and eryngo (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) in the fall.

Wildflower Center Senior Horticulturalist Julie Krosley explains that the volunteers incorporate flowers from home and from designated areas in the Wildflower Center’s gardens as well as from the Center’s cut flowers bed in the Demonstration Garden, a dedicated bed that was created to meet the demand for more flowers for use in arrangements. This cut flower garden includes black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) in the spring, wooly ironweed (*Vernonia lindheimeri*) in the summer, and small palafox (*Palafoxia callosa*) in the fall.



PHOTO BY SCOT HILL



ABOVE Left Janet Hampel of Florabella Designs tends one of her native plant creations in Whitehall, Michigan. **Right Pamela Arnosky** bundles cut native flowers to be sold at Central Texas area grocers and at the Arnoskys' farm between Blanco and Austin.

for Market," a trade publication for direct-market farmers. They compiled the columns from 1995 to 1998 into the book "We're Gonna Be Rich!" and are profiled in the second edition of "The Flower Farmer" by Lynn Byczynski, Chelsea Green Press.

The Arnoskys' 128-acre farm is now a leader in the specialty cut flower industry. "We have about 40 acres in cut flowers, which we market under the brand Texas Specialty Cut Flowers," says Pamela. The rest is dedicated to vegetables, goats and fruit orchards – and some of it is left wild. Pamela estimates that during spring most bouquets contain three to four different wildflowers. She names at least 16 different wildflowers grown on the farm, including Texas bluebells (*Eustoma exaltatum* ssp. *russellianum*), clasp cone flower (*Dracopis amplexicaulis*) and cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*).

Frank says, "We have over 50 to 60 flowers. We try to rotate crops so that nothing is ever planted in a bed that had the same crop within a year. That way we can

avoid diseases and pests. There's such a variety of plant material out here, so we never really get pest build-up in any great amount. We get a lot of natural plant material and natural predators living in the borders surrounding the beds."

Located in Peyton Colony between Blanco and Austin, the farm is important to the public. "One of the reasons we have the farm as a destination is that we want people to feel like we are their flower farmer," she says. "Saturdays we do a year-round farm stand. And then it's self-serve all week." In addition to their own flowers and produce, they sell local items such as Pure Luck Grade A goat dairy cheeses, Full Quiver Farms cow cheeses, and Onion Creek Kitchens' spice mixes and tapenades. "We have a vision of gently developed agricultural tourism out here."

In addition to Central Market, Texas Specialty Cut Flowers are used by numerous retail florists and floral designers and can be found in Austin at markets including Whole Foods, Westlake H-E-B and Westbank Flower Market.



WILDFLOWER FACT

When designing a wildflower arrangement, a good rule of thumb is to remove at least every other leaf to avoid a crowded look – particularly at the top of the container, according to Wildflower Center volunteer floral designer Maggie Livings.

With four children – Derrick, Hannah Rose, Janos and Elena – and a farm to run, life is full. In return, the Arnoskys are full of life and hundreds of good stories. A classic is the invitation the self-described “good yellow dog Democrats” received – with some hesitation – to attend George W. Bush’s first inaugural ball. With friend Lady Bird Johnson’s blessing and a borrowed old Louis Vuitton luggage piece from her, they headed to Washington.

The Arnoskys’ zest for life and growing flowers is shared by friend and colleague East Coast flower farmer Bob Wollam, owner of Wollam Gardens in Jeffersonton, Virginia, about 60 miles from Washington, D.C. These days, Wollam can’t stop talking about growing woody plants. He bought the 11-acre farm in 1988 and has about seven acres in intense production. Wollam enthusiastically describes growing the white (lactea) form of American beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) and the Welch’s pink cultivar that was discovered in the woods of East Texas. He describes other native woody plants on the farm such as red and gold winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), blue wild indigo (*Baptisia australis*) and the common ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) in the ‘Diablo’ cultivar with its dark-purple stems and purple capsules that form after flowering.

“I’m continually searching for plants that make great cut flowers that other people don’t grow well or other people don’t grow at all or that don’t ship well,” he says.

“Everywhere in the world I’ve lived, including Thailand, Malaysia, Ohio, Connecticut and Texas, I owned a farm or had a piece of land for growing. I always wanted to plant some flowers and plant some veggies. All those years I was in the corporate world. But I was always a would-be farmer,” Wollam remarks.

In the early 1990s, Wollam enrolled in a landscape design program at George Washington University and realized that he loved the plant classes. Soon after that he discovered cut flowers and later met Frank Arnosky. “I realized that this [growing cut flowers] is what I was supposed to be doing,” he says. Now, part of what he loves doing is teaching future generations of

flower farmers. His passion for teaching inspired him to bring on board resident interns, who among other things help staff the farm’s booths at farmers’ markets in Washington, D.C., and Northern Virginia. Wollam was instrumental in starting the Tri-County Farmers’ Market in Fauquier County, Virginia – close to the farm.

“The demand for locally grown flowers is serious. Florists are calling me and saying, ‘I’ve got this bride that wants local flowers,’” reports Wollam, who also markets to about 15 retail florists, a handful of Whole Foods markets and five or six floral designers who come directly to the farm to buy.

The style and motivation of floral designers who use wildflowers in their arrangements is as varied as the shape, color and texture of each bud, leaf and blossom. Janet Hampel, owner of Florabella Designs, began designing floral arrangements in the ‘90s. She found herself more and more attracted to incorporating native plants and sustainably grown flowers as a logical intersection between her personal beliefs and her professional goals. “When you purchase sustainably grown flowers, you are protecting the environment and expressing your understanding of the connection between your own well-being and that of the earth. More and more consumers are waking up to this idea,” Hampel says.

“After all, real beauty in a floral arrangement,” she continues, “doesn’t require lavish, out-of-season exotics trucked in from a thousand miles away.”

Although not all clients want native flowers and plants, Hampel – who works mainly in Austin, Texas, western Michigan, and Aspen, Colorado – gears her lush creations to meet the tone of each event. Her earth-friendly designs reflect



An intern from **Wollam Gardens** in Jeffersonton, Virginia, shows a customer at the Penn Quarter Farmers’ Market in Washington, D.C., a floral arrangement made of Virginia natives. The bouquet includes white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*), brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*), goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.), winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*) and inland sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*).

The fact that most wildflowers are fragile and won’t tolerate the packaging and shipping that other flowers can makes local flowers more attractive to some florists.

the season at hand and bring together local greenery, native potted plants, and locally grown, organically sourced and native flowers, when possible. “It’s all about seasonality,” she says.

Across the country in northern Virginia, the floral designs of May

Bernhardt, designer/owner of Mayflowers Floral Studios have an avant garde and couture look. To achieve this look, Bernhardt often relies on a variety of natives for accents in her floral designs. “I’m one of Bob Wollam’s original customers when he first started,” says May Bernhardt. “I buy about 50 percent of my flowers from him in the summer. The beautyberries [*Callicarpa americana*] are my favorites, and the chokeberries [*Photinia pyrifolia*] with their red berries are beautiful for the fall. I use the inland sea oats [*Chasmanthium latifolium*] all throughout the summer.”

Event planners also have noticed an increased demand for native arrangements. The family-owned Barr Mansion and Artisan Ballroom in Austin, Texas, is the first certified organic events facility in the nation. Abby Daigle serves as resident florist and event coordinator and is the daughter of owners Melanie and Mark McAfee, who are deeply committed to sustainable communities. Daigle estimates that about 5 percent of clients seek out wildflowers and locally grown flowers for their celebrations. Despite the small number, she sees an overall growing awareness of the green movement among clients, many of whom are bridal couples. “We’re lucky that our clients are usually more centered around green aspects and local and organic,” Daigle says. Even if clients do not select wildflowers for their floral arrangements, Daigle uses greenery grown on-site to decorate platters, plates and buffets.

Whatever the motivation for creating floral designs with native wildflowers, the end product results in numerous benefits for the community at large. The environment wins from continued cultivation of native species and fewer natural resources used for transportation of local plants. Farms contribute to a strong local economy by providing jobs and add to social equity by enabling diverse communities. And, finally, the aesthetic appeal of flowers and flower farms can’t be emphasized enough. 🌸

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Bringing the Outdoors In

Wildflower arrangements take tender loving care

IF YOU WANT TO TRY YOUR HAND at floral design, growing flowers that you would like to see on your table is among the first things to consider. Mountainmint (*Pycnanthemum* spp.) makes an excellent choice for floral arrangements, recommends Virginia flower farmer Bob Wollam. “It’s a nice chalky green, and the flowers are fairly inconspicuous.” Dividing every three to five years may help keep this perennial from taking over in garden beds.

The native brown-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*) is a frequent addition to Texas flower farmers Pamela and Frank Arnoskys’ mixed bouquets. The annual produces bright orange-yellow blossoms marked with a dark center and thrives in either full sun or light shade in sandy or loamy soil and with moderate moisture.

Carol Bornstein, director of Nursery and Horticultural Outreach at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, recommends the California foothill penstemon (*Penstemon heterophyllus*) for cut flower arrangements. The drought-tolerant perennial has one-inch violet to purple flowers on 1- to 3-foot stems and, when cut, holds up well “for a week or more, depending on conditions,” according to Bornstein.

(You can check the native range of these plants at www.wildflower.org/explore/)

Wildflower Center volunteer floral designer Maggie Livings offers these tips for working with native flowers.

- Place cut stems directly in water at the moment of cutting. Do not leave them in the car or direct sunlight, as they will become heat-stressed even in water.
- Collect flowers using clean buckets or containers to extend flower life.
- Remove any foliage that might be below water line in the vase. Foliage under water will rot, causing bacterial growth, and will shorten flower life.
- Cut stems at a slant with a sharp knife to provide more surface area for uptake of water.
- When arranging, re-cut stem to appropriate length, dip in hydration fluid (Quick Dip by Floralife is one product) and immediately place in water treated with fresh flower food.
- Fresh flower food extends the life of flowers by giving them sugars. It also lowers the pH of the water to keep the water/food-conducting systems in cut stems working at maximum efficiency. A bioinhibitor prevents bacterial growth.
- The acid in flower food will react with metal (including lead in crystal). Avoid using flower food in metal or crystal containers.
- Water arrangements daily. Because they are fresh-cut and have not been through the processing procedures of the floral industry, they will drink a lot of water, particularly within the first few days after cutting.

For advice about how to create compelling floral arrangements, visit www.wildflower.org/magazine this winter for a related article on the topic. A Go Native U informal gardening class offered at the Wildflower Center next spring will focus on cut flower arrangements. In January, visit www.wildflower.org/gonativeu/ for a schedule of classes.

An arrangement by Janet Hampel of Florabella Designs features aspects of Michigan native plants including the bark of redosier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), leaves of red sumac (*Rhus glabra*) and hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), branches of white pine (*Pinus strobus*), cones of white spruce (*Picea glauca*), and black raspberries (*Rubus occidentalis*).

