

# American Floral Story

BY MACKENZIE NICHOLS

**E**IGHTY percent of the cut flowers for sale in the United States have traveled thousands of miles from other countries. This factoid inspired Debra Prinzing to write *The 50 Mile Bouquet*, published in 2012, in which she explores more sustainable, domestically raised alternatives to the chemical-laden, high carbon-footprint blooms from afar. The book received a good deal of acclaim, but critics argued that fresh flowers couldn't be supplied year-round when relying solely on homegrown sources. Prinzing, who lives in Seattle, Washington, rose to the challenge, creating a bouquet a week with locally produced flowers for an entire year. She turned the project into another book, *Slow Flowers: Four Seasons of Locally Grown Bouquets from the Garden, Meadow and Farm*, published in 2013.

Through the process of researching and writing about the colorful world of local, seasonal flower production, Prinzing found herself in the middle of a budding movement that was clearly resonating with consumers and the floral industry alike. Though the movement focuses on flowers, it shares similarities with the Slow Food movement that also focuses on using what's in season and locally and sustainably produced. So, the term Slow Flowers fit.

Prinzing got down to business, creating a website ([www.slowflowers.com](http://www.slowflowers.com)) to house a directory of Slow Flowers growers and florists across the country, launching a podcast to keep the conversations going, and most recently organizing an annual summit around the topic. Under the Slow Flowers banner, Prinzing's work is helping to change the American floral industry and its environmental

footprint for the better. And while these efforts earned her the Frances Jones Poetker Award from the American Horticultural Society this year, Prinzing sees Slow Flowers as very much a collaboration between all the growers, floral designers, and others who embody its philosophy.

On a personal level, Prinzing says that her affinity for growing and harvesting fresh flowers is in her DNA. She fondly recalls childhood memories of walking among her maternal grandfather's dahlias in Indiana that were taller than her. He grew them for competitions, winning several awards over the years. For her paternal grandfather, peonies were his passion. Prinzing notes that though the gardening genes skipped a generation because neither of her parents had an interest, she is glad those genes have manifested so prominently in her. I recently caught up with her to discuss the Slow Flowers movement's progress and her related floral endeavors.

**Nichols:** *What sparked your interest in gardening?*

**Prinzing:** Both my grandfathers were passionate gardeners, so that left a strong impression on me as a child. And when I was in college, I had two friends studying landscape design, so by osmosis I was sucked into their world. Now I'm an avid home gardener, maybe even a little obsessed in my focus on flowers.

**How did that passion feed into your career?**

I started out my working life as a business reporter for the *Puget Sound Business Journal*, but I fantasized about garden writing. I eventually decided to turn those fantasies into reality, so I took horticulture classes and became a Master Gardener. My under-



Meet Debra Prinzing, founder of the Slow Flowers movement that promotes a sustainable, farm-to-vase approach to fresh flowers.



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Above: American Flowers Week is one of Slow Flowers's outreach campaigns. Right: Workers harvest locally-grown zinnias at Robin Hollow Farm in Rhode Island for market bouquets.



graduate degree is in textiles, so I already had a familiarity with design concepts, which helped tremendously with gardening and floral arranging. Ironically through Slow Flowers, I ended up returning to business journalism by writing about small businesses.

**How did the Slow Flowers movement come about?**

There has been a cultural shift in the last decade or so. People are more conscious than ever before about the origins of what they buy, asking where it was made or grown. They care about sustainable practices and reducing chemical use for food production, so it's not that far of a stretch to apply these same principles to the cut-flower industry. The idea is not to disparage imports, but to let people know they have choices about the flowers they buy, and those choices impact a bigger universe.



**Why do you believe Slow Flowers is an important concept to promote?**

According to surveys done by the California Cut Flower Commission, nearly three-quarters of the American population doesn't know where cut flowers at grocery stores or florists originated, and often there aren't labels to tell them. And those who want to find seasonal and locally-sourced flowers don't know where to look. While promoting *The 50 Mile Bouquet* at garden club meetings and other places, people were enthusiastic about the message, but I didn't have a good answer when they asked how to find the florists and farmers who are revitalizing this branch of agriculture. So that inspired me to begin compiling this information and building a website, which launched four years ago. It now includes more than 700 businesses across the U.S. and Canada.

**What benefits do these businesses gain from aligning themselves with Slow Flowers?**

Because imports tend to be cheaper, changing perceptions can feel like pushing a boulder uphill. Florists and farmers can use the Slow Flowers philosophy as a narrative to get their customers excited about locally-grown heirloom peonies, for example, that are bigger and more saturated in color, compared to mass-produced blossoms that have traveled long distances. If they want to differentiate themselves and create a brand that is local, seasonal, and sustainable, there are immediate benefits to getting people excited about domestically grown flowers.

**What indicates to you that the Slow Flowers movement is gaining ground?**

I noticed that there was a total Slow Flowers vibe from Meghan Markle and Prince Harry's royal wedding floral design, which garnered a lot of press. The movement is attracting more media attention in general, and I've found that many more people are becoming receptive to the value of sustainably- and locally-grown flowers. And for the American Horticultural Society to recognize my Slow Flowers efforts with the Frances Jones Poetker Award, that's definitely a significant indication of the movement's impact.

*Based in New York City, Mackenzie Nichols is a floral designer who frequently writes for the Society of American Florists.*

**DEBRA PRINZING'S TOP 10 PICKS FOR SIZZLING SUMMER BOUQUETS**

Nothing is closer to home than growing your own flowers to fill your vases. Every garden has room for at least a few of these colorful plants that will brighten up your beds and bouquets with their eye-catching flowers and foliage.

**DAHLIA** These are truly the divas of the summer garden, especially the huge dinner plate forms, but for floral design purposes, I prefer the medium-sized forms, including ball, pompon, miniature, and waterlily.

**ZINNIA** These generous bloomers provide plenty of color for all sorts of arrangements. For unique colors, the Queen series offers soft washes of pinks, mauves, and limes. I like the tiny Persian Carpet zinnias for creating exciting textural accents.

**SUNFLOWER** I'm a sucker for the newer colors and also multi-branching sunflowers. ProCut 'Plum', ProCut 'White Night', 'Moulin Rouge', 'Strawberry Blonde', and 'Chocolate' are some that I'm growing.

**COSMOS** The Double Click and Cupcake series offer uniquely pleated petals and some of the darker cranberry hues that I like to use to balance lighter colors.

**AMMI** This annual is also known as false Queen Anne's lace and bishop's weed. I grow 'Dara' (purple-chocolate color range), 'White Dill,' and 'Green Mist' because they provide so much soft texture and volume.

**YARROW** A great plant for pollinators and extremely long-lasting as a cut flower. I love the pure colors as well as the more muted/pastel varieties.

**SHASTA DAISY** This is a quintessential cottage garden flower. Double forms such as 'Crazy Daisy' and 'Sante' add extra excitement.

**ROSES** I love roses in the caramel and terra cotta range such as Hot Cocoa™, Cinco de Mayo™ and Pumpkin Patch™ from Weeks Roses. And I just planted more than a dozen cultivars from David Austin Roses that promise to provide some novel forms and heavenly fragrance.

**HERBS** Several provide fabulous foliage and fragrance in cut arrangements. For example, I like to add a few sprigs of purple basil or 'Berggarten' sage to complement simple bouquets.

**NIGELLA** Its blue blooms and unusual seedpods amid a lacy netting of greenery are quite eye-catching in any kind of bouquet.

—Debra Prinzing



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