

 BUY LOCAL

COOPERATION OVER COMPETITION

SMALL CANADIAN FLOWER FARMERS JOIN FORCES TO BOOST SALES

ARTICLE BY ADRIENNE MASON

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL FLOWER COLLECTIVE

Across Canada, the number of small flower farms, particularly those offering field-grown specialty cut flowers, are increasing. Since 2017, Canadian membership in the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers has quadrupled, from 45 members in 2017 to almost 200 today. And since 2019, gross field-grown cut flower sales across Canada have more than doubled, from just under \$15 million to \$34 million.

Cut flower growers have a broad mix of potential marketing channels, including farm-gate, markets, and bouquet subscriptions, but getting flowers into the hands of florists and event designers used to buying through large wholesalers is more challenging. To link producers to buyers and help support the long-term sustainability of flower farms, various initiatives across the country are coordinating these connections.

Florists Jaimie Reeves and Carrie Fisher founded Toronto's The Local Flower Collective in 2018. As florists committed to sustainability, they were keen to use locally grown, seasonal flowers and foliage, but witnessed firsthand the inefficiencies of growers and buyers trying to make individual connections. After getting feedback from farmers and florists, and investigating potential models, they opted to establish the collective as a sole proprietorship. "It was the easiest and least expensive way to set up," says Reeves. In this model, Reeves owns the business (Fisher has since moved on) and growers and buyers purchase memberships to participate. Fees vary depending on use and start at \$350 per season for growers and \$200 for buyers. Memberships cover overhead costs, including the salaries of two studio assistants, a bookkeeper, and an operations manager. In

load their weekly availability to the e-commerce platform on Thursday, for pickup at the studio the following week. (Delivery is also an option.) The collective gives further support by showcasing florist's work and the grower's farms on social media and offers services such as studio space and prop rental.

Although the business lies with Reeves, it's still very much a collaborative model. She regularly checks with members and does an annual survey. "I want to have everyone's input," she says.

In Edmonton, another collaborative project opted to spread the workload around. Started in 2023, the Cooperative Flower Network was formed by 11 Edmonton-area flower farmers. "We very much have a 'rising tide lifts all boats' philosophy," says Moira MacKinnon, one of the co-founders. "If we can get local flowers into the hands of consumers, that's going to help all of our businesses thrive."

Like The Local Flower Collective, growers in the network post their offerings once a week, on Monday. Growers cut on Tuesday and deliver the product to a local brewery Wednesday morning for pick-up by florists who each pay \$50 a year for a client pass. In 2024, 40 florists utilized the Cooperative Flower Network.

In this model, the farmers are business partners, each of whom purchased 500 shares at a dollar a piece to get the cooperative launched. It requires more bureaucratic underpinnings—by-laws, policies and procedures, regular meetings, for instance—but the work is spread across the group, as is profit. The



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Both models use the Open Food Network Canada's (OFN) e-commerce platform to help deal with the administrative headache of co-ordinating billing with multiple vendors, something that threatens to bring any collaborative project—regardless of how admirable—to its knees. Launched in 2017, OFN uses an open-source software to help growers integrate online sales and e-commerce into their businesses.

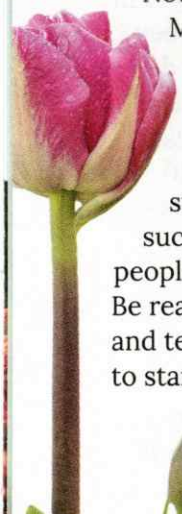
Growers load their inventory onto the OFN platform and have control over price and where they sell within the platform. They can sell individually—an interactive map of Canada allows buyers to find nearby farms—but also through hubs. The hubs can be formal such as The Local Flower Collective, or informal, such as a buying club, says Theresa Schumilas, who established OFN in Canada. Recently, for instance, several growers from the Grey Bruce Area formed their own hub on the platform to sell closer to home.

Whether it's called a cooperative, a collective, or a hub, all the models demonstrate the potential for collaborative marketplaces to support small farmers. E-commerce platforms streamline administration, and the one-stop-shopping is more efficient for buyers and sellers. And Collective selling helps minimize some of the frustration coming from florists, including lack of supply. "If you're relying on one farmer there can be breaks in service," says MacKinnon, who is both a florist and a flower farmer. "We fill each other's gaps, which allows the customer to have consistency." And, of course, collaboration has the potential to significantly increase sales.

Nothing is without its challenges though.

MacKinnon notes that at times a cooperative can sometimes be like a big group project, and stresses that constant communication is key. If there's tension, air it and "put a pin in it," she says. Both MacKinnon and Reeves stress that for a collaborative project to be successful it's important to align yourself with people who have similar goals and expectations. Be realistic about what your growers can supply, and temper expectations of florists who are used to standardized imports. To Reeves and MacKin-

nnon, that difference is the strength of finding collaborative ways of getting locally grown, seasonal flowers into the marketplace. "We can deliver some-



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