



## **BANKING ON DRIED FLOWERS: SMALL CANADIAN FLOWER FARMERS ARE EXTENDING THE SEASON AND BOOSTING PROFITS WITH DRIED BOTANICALS**

ARTICLE BY ADRIENNE MASON

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Heather Henson was three years into her flower farming business—Boreal Blooms near Cold Lake, Alberta—when she knew something had to change if she wanted a viable business. With a five-month growing season, she needed to find a way to stay in front of her customers. “I had to have some reason to connect throughout the year, even if it was only for Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and winter weddings,” she says. She first experimented with drying larkspur and was surprised at how vibrant and bright the colours stayed. “The blooms were as good, or even better, than fresh,” she says. People responded positively to the small bouquets, so Henson “went down a rabbit hole,” exploring what else she could grow that would dry well. Today, after 12 years in business, about 75 percent of what Henson grows on her half-acre operation can be dried, allowing her to offer product year-round.

With her years of experience, Henson is well-positioned to meet the growing demand for dried floral products. Market reports show that the preserved flower market is experiencing steady growth with no signs of petering out. While older clientele may still hold onto memories of dusty, fussy dried flower arrangements and potpourri of the 1970s and ‘80s, younger customers especially respond enthusiastically to the vibrant blooms and the “boho chic” vibe.

Nikki Wiart of Lady’s Hat Farm near Castor, Alberta, sees that reaction time and again. “People are shocked that the flowers are dried,” she says. Bailey Dueker of Boondock Flower Farm north of Biggar, Saskatchewan, gets similar responses. “They’re stunned that they’re real flowers and that they stay so vibrant,” she says.

Wiart, who is active on social media, has been tracking the growing enthusiasm for dried flowers in floriculture over the five years she’s been focused more on crops suitable for drying. “We’re probably a couple of years behind Europe and even the States as far as trends go,” she says, “but I’m seeing more and more flower farms producing the most beautiful dried flowers and seeming to make a go of it.”

All three growers are self-taught, and relied on lots of experimentation, colleagues, and even out-of-print books on “everlasting flowers” to determine the best crops for drying, as well as how best to treat them post-harvest. Henson discovered a treasure trove in the book *Alberta Supernaturals*, written by Buck Godwin, who started the



**Boreal Blooms - Cold Lake, Alberta**



**Boondock Flower Farm - Biggar, Saskatchewan**

horticulture program at Olds College back in 1963. Godwin tested all manner of annuals, perennials, grasses, and even foraged botanicals, for drying, and perfected techniques to maintain colour and form.

While strawflowers, statice, and grasses are mainstays of most commercial dried flowers available on the market, Henson, Wiart, and Dueker experiment with a variety of flowers—even multi-petaled beauties such as peonies, marigolds, and ranunculus. Dueker’s on-line catalogue includes over 60 varieties on offer—flowers, foliage, seed pods, and grasses, including wheat and millet, all retaining natural colours that span the rainbow palette.

For farmers already growing flowers, the infrastructure required to start testing dried flowers is minimal. All that’s needed is a place to dry the crops and room to store them. Spaces must be dry, have good air circulation, and be dark to reduce fading. Wiart was lucky to have a barn on her farm that she could enlist for drying. She hangs the blooms in bundles of 10 and leaves the windows slightly open to maintain a breeze. With no access to a barn or outbuilding, Henson initially added hooks to her seed-starting shelves in her basement, blacked out the windows, and added a dehumidifier. When it’s cold, she’ll fire up the wood stove. Dueker uses her basement still too, hanging the flowers from nails she’s hammered into exposed floor joists. Depending on the variety, it takes about two to four weeks for the botanicals to fully dry. After that, they’re stored in boxes or upright in florist buckets.

In season, fresh flowers are still the mainstay of these growers’ farms, but almost everything they grow can also be dried, giving them flexibility. Even during the best growing months, knowing they have a dried flower arm to their business reduces the angst that comes with growing a perishable product. Wiart, who has bouquets in several retail outlets, will dry any blooms that don’t sell fresh. “There’s still so much

life in those flowers,” she says. Extending the life of something that would otherwise be tossed “takes away a lot of the stress.”

Using dried flowers also helps reduce the anxiety associated with weddings. All three growers offer wedding services for both fresh and dried flowers but love the flexibility that using dried product affords. Henson, who also works off the farm as a doula, has to turn down weddings that might coincide with a birth if the bride is insistent on fresh flowers. “A fresh flower wedding is an intense three-day process, but with dried flowers, I could make the arrangements two weeks before the wedding,” she says. Similarly, dried flowers make good sense for clients who are travelling for weddings or opting for unconventional venues, such as a mountaintop. Dried bouquets don’t wilt or need constant coddling, and for brides who want to save their flowers, they have a ready-made piece.

Maximizing profit from their crops and providing value-added products through dried flowers makes their businesses more financially sustainable. Dried flowers also make them more environmentally sustainable. “I’ve rooted my business in sustainability,” says Wiart, “and dried flowers are the most sustainable flowers you can have in Alberta in winter.” As with all small farmers, educating customers is an ongoing process. But there’s an added layer with dried flowers since most of what’s commercially available is imported (mostly from China) and often bleached, dyed, or spray painted. It frustrates Henson: “They’re taking a beautiful ecological product, and ruining it,” she says. “We can provide a natural, compostable product, that has almost zero footprint.” **SF** ♦

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**Bailey Dueker:** <https://boondockflowerfarm.com/>

**Heather Henson:** <https://www.borealblooms.ca>

**Nikki Wiart:** <https://www.ladyshatfarm.com>