



the Flower Farmer's year

How to grow cut flowers for pleasure and profit

GEORGIE NEWBERY

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To Fabrizio, the Bear and the Wiggler, who drive me to do it all.

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Thanks also to my editor Alethea Doran, who has patiently taught me how a factual, rather than a fictional, book needs to be put together.

And to Fabrizio and our children, who put up with my absurd drive to do more in a day than most people would contemplate in a week, and with my ruthless disinterest in housework and laundry. Thanks to Fabrizio too for feeding me and making sure there is wine in the fridge when necessary.

It is our customers, especially our Twitter following, who have made this business, and I am grateful to all of them.

Foreword

Flowers are important – very important – in oh, so many ways.

Many, many years ago I gave flowers to the beautiful girl who is now my wife. Being a bit of a show-off, I felt a grand gesture was required, so delivered two hundred roses to her office in a battered Land Rover while wearing a kilt. She was extremely embarrassed, but (such is the power of young love and flowers) forgave me, and the rest is, as the cliché goes, history.

I share this snippet with you to show the persuasiveness of flowers.

Georgie Newbery is, therefore, a cross between an enchantress and Wonderwoman, as her Somerset flower farm is the source of the power to change people's lives. To make it even better, she does it with style, pizzazz and a social conscience.

Her flowers are grown with consideration for both the locality and the wider environment. Aphids are allowed (because they feed the ladybirds) and slugs are permitted (to keep the hedgehogs happy). There are hedges (for foliage and berries), trees (for catkins and bark) and a formidable miscellany of good, healthy British flowers. From sweet peas and sorrel to buttercups and bistorts: there's pretty much anything that can be moulded into a nosegay, wreath, sprig or garland.

So next time you need a bouquet (whether to get yourself into or out of trouble), eschew the garage-forecourt chrysanthemum and the scentless, pesticide-laden imported rose, and call Georgie: she can always be relied on to pack a powerful bunch.

James Alexander-Sinclair



Introduction:

Why grow cut flowers?

The international cut-flower industry is a monster, a behemoth, a vast bloom-producing machine, in which plants, water, chemicals and people are bent to the will of the world's flower-greedy public. Year-round, hundreds of millions of flowers are produced by thousands of workers working flat-out to supply our desire for great big long-lasting bouquets to give our mothers, lovers, friends and neighbours.

We give flowers at the drop of a hat: for Christmas, Easter, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day; for love, congratulations, anniversaries, commiserations... But do we think about where these flowers come from? Do we care about the environmental impact they have had in their journey from far across the sea – through fungicide bath to air-vacuumed cold storage – and eventually, kept alive with frequent pulses of sugar and bleach, to our own kitchen tables? When a bride walks down the aisle, coyly dipping her nose to her tight-packed bunch of roses, do we think of the chemicals she's breathing in?

There is a small revolution happening worldwide. People are beginning to realize the environmental impact of their cut-flower habit. The same people who worry about where their meat comes from – how it was raised, what it grazed on; the same people who'd rather not buy out-of-season green beans or strawberries flown in from the other side of the world – those people are looking at the bunches of flowers they have, until recently, added unthinkingly to their supermarket trolleys, and they're leaving those bunches on the shelves. They are making a quiet protest at the environmental cost of the international cut-flower trade.

However, while people may no longer like to buy chemical-dunked flowers looking shocked after release from weeks of cold storage, they still like to buy flowers. And if they're not going to buy them at the supermarket checkout, or they're told at the high-street florist shop that all the flowers there are imported, then where are they going to get them?

Well, maybe you've picked up this book because you remember that your grandmothers' gardens were full of flowers for cutting... That there used to be a whole group of little flower farms in the next town or village... That small-scale, domestic flower-growing used to be a good industry. And you are thinking of turning to your seed catalogues and beginning to grow cut flowers yourself.

Home-grown cut flowers sold to a relatively local market have virtually no carbon footprint – and certainly no air miles! And however much you like to douse your garden in

chemicals, believe me, you will be using an infinitesimal amount compared with the fungicide-dunking that some multinational companies impose on flowers flown in from South America and Kenya.



A mixed bouquet of flowers fresh from the garden: including roses, feverfew, ammi and scabious.

Flowers grown in a small-scale setting are fresher by days than flowers flown from big corporations' air-conditioned polytunnels in South America to the auction in Holland, then flown on again to another country's wholesale market, where they are bought by a florist who may then have them sitting around in the shop for days before selling them to you.

Grow your own and you can grow what you cannot buy: the lace-capped flowers, the wild flowers which won't travel out of water, the sweet peas which will fill your house with their sweet, peppery perfume because you don't treat them with silver nitrate to make them last longer. Your flowers will be scented, will feed the bees, will grow in the vase. Will you be able to sell your surplus? Well, once you've read this book, then I hope you'll agree that you can.

My other half and business partner Fabrizio Boccha decided that we would be *artisan* florists and flower farmers, and I think the word 'artisan' is so important as part of the description of what we do. Our work is carefully crafted, handmade, bespoke. Our crops are grown with an eye to feeding our environment as well as feeding our own need for beautiful cut flowers. We consider ourselves artists in that each bouquet is a piece of work as perfect and fleeting as the salt mandalas made by Buddhist monks in the mountains of Nepal, whose focus on their work is intense and perfectionist, in full knowledge that the

day the mandala is finished is the day that the wind begins to blow it away.

Cut flowers should have that fleeting beauty too, their inevitable end giving their presentation a loveliness more cherished because it cannot last. Artisan growers work in the moment; plan for the minute; are attuned at all times to the gorgeous combinations that can be made on a certain day, in a certain month, at a certain season – never the same twice, certainly not two years running. Let the international cut-flower trade specialize in gerberas that will last a month, in single-stem unscented roses which they dunk 50 at a time in fungicide to keep them lasting. Let them deal with the problem of extracting from the water they pour back into the system the silver nitrate in which their flowers are conditioned.

You and I can create an entirely different industry: one concerned with life, with freshness, with delicate, ephemeral beauty – safe in the knowledge that while our flowers will happily last a week in water, they won't ever last a month. Why would we want the same bouquet to last a month when we have a garden full of flowers to cut, and we need the space for a new bouquet of loveliness?

This is a book to teach you how to produce cut flowers from your patch all year round. It is also a book that will teach you the song you need to sing to sell your flowers to a public which is asking for answers, which wants to buy what you can grow in your back yard, which is already protesting against the international cut-flower trade – but which still loves a bouquet of flowers to put on the kitchen table as a weekly treat.

Who we are

Here at Common Farm in Somerset, Fabrizio and I started our little flower farm in a corner of our vegetable patch in April 2010. I have a background in writing and fashion; he in art and antiques. Neither of us are trained horticulturalists or florists – though my mother paid me to weed by the yard when I was a child, and she cut her floristry teeth working at The Dorchester in the 1960s, so perhaps what I do *is* in the genes. Half of my attraction to Fabrizio when we met was that despite lacking an actual garden, he still grew a profusion of sweet peas in pots on the little terrace outside the cottage where he lived. Together we have become excellent, self-taught gardeners, and, rather than any flower-school rules of three or five, our floristry is inspired by the Dutch seventeenth-century painters of lush still lives, and by the Scottish Colourists.

In our first season we had eight stands of sweet peas, a 3m x 3m (10' x 10') patch of dahlias and, I think, three 3m x 1m (10' x 3') beds of annuals. We grew no flowers in our polytunnel, which at that stage was still filled with a greedy crop of cucumbers, tomatoes and chillies. In our first year we sold at farmers' markets, from a barrow out in the lane, and I had a stall at about six wedding fairs, where I learned more than I sold – about what brides want and the prices they expect to pay.

We began our cut-flower business because we needed to find a way for the house and land to pay their way. We had two very small children, and gardening is a job that can be done in 20-minute increments, which was often all the time I had. More importantly, I realized that whatever job we did to pay the bills, we were going to garden as well, and so it seemed intelligent to turn the activity that would drive us, whatever the weather, into the way we made our living.

Turning Common Farm Flowers into a serious business has been an exhausting ride, during most of which I've felt as though the learning curve has been so steep that I've been hanging on by my fingertips. I am (or perhaps was) no business-woman, and I've had no training in marketing. The many lessons we've learned are included throughout this book, so there's no need for you too to learn them the hard way!

We now sell bouquets throughout the UK for 12 months a year. We are asked for, and are delighted to supply, wedding flowers year-round. We teach something like 30 workshops a year, and the business has grown enough to support three full-time staff plus others part-time.

My point, I suppose, is that if we can do it, so can you. A patch need be no bigger than half an allotment to create income from cut flowers. After all, a sweet pea is worth a great deal more than a lettuce leaf (although, of course, it is poisonous, so perhaps its value is compromised by being *only* for show). Whether you want to grow a few bunches of sweet peas for sales from your garden gate or have your eye on creating a higher-income business, I hope this book will inspire you, get you started, and help you throughout many years of cut-flower growing.

The human race has created a \$40 billion-a-year industry in cut flowers. That's plenty of money for a lot of small growers to share!



A nice morning's cut from our flower garden.

A note to the non-UK reader

Every gardener grows plants in their own particular microclimate, influenced not only by location but by soil conditions, aspect, and so on. I have tried to be general regarding the ‘hows and whys’ of how you manage your plot through the seasons, but inevitably there will be moments where growers no further from us than Wiltshire may frown and mutter to themselves, “Well, not here!” So, for growers further afield, here’s how I’ve decided to describe our year in print.

Throughout this book, I refer to the conditions needed for a given plant to grow successfully here in Somerset, and in the wider context of the UK. I imagine that the reader in the US, for example, already has sufficient interest in gardening to know that in a place such as Vermont, say, where winters come early, stay hard and thaw late, the growing season for cut flowers will be shorter than in the gentle climes just north of San Francisco. Common Farm is in a UK zone broadly equivalent in temperature and season to zone 9, in the US system of plant hardiness zones. Most of the UK (though perhaps the far north might be considered colder) corresponds to zones 8 and 9 of the United States.

There has been much debate here about how best to describe the phases of the year so that the text is helpful to readers everywhere. The truth is that our schedule as flower farmers is quite precise, and I felt that to say that we did any thing in ‘mid spring’, for example, was too vague – when we schedule our getting-out the dahlia tubers from their winter sleep for 1 April exactly. I hope that readers elsewhere will forgive this decision, and I am sure that, wherever you are, you are intelligent enough to extrapolate your own gardening approach from my account.

[Appendix 1](#) includes a year planner for the flower farmer, and in the table there each month is also given in a ‘generic’ form, to help you translate the timings described in this book to suit the seasons in your own location.

Horticultural Latin

I have aimed to refer to plants by the name they're most commonly known by – whether that be Latin, anglicized Latin, or their common name. Of course, where common names are used, the plant might be known differently in other places, so please see [Appendix 2](#) to identify a plant by its Latin name if necessary.

And finally...

The lists of plants I provide in this book are by no means exhaustive. Who could possibly list all the annuals one could grow in a year, let alone all the perennials and shrubs in the world which make good cut-flower material? I could spend years adding to the lists in this book. Moreover, I feel strongly that the way you curate the collection in your cut-flower patch is up to you. My taste in roses is almost certainly going to be quite different from yours; likewise my taste in tulips, viburnums, foxgloves and the rest.

My aim in this book is rather to inspire you to look beyond the obvious; to ask questions about what will and won't make good floristry material; to turn your ability as a gardener into an artistry with flowers. Whether your desire is to have a cut-flower patch that you harvest on a Friday and sell at a regular Saturday market, to sell bunches of sweet peas at the garden gate, to supply wedding flowers, or to take on the big flower importers with your locally grown blooms, this book is intended to inject a can-do attitude into your gardening.

You will learn as you grow. Make notes – and remember that no two gardens are the same, and no two horticulturalists will tell you how to grow the same way. Gardening successfully, and therefore flower-farming successfully, is more about being in tune with your plot than anything else. Listen to what I have to say, listen to all the other flower farmers – then do what you want to do and make your farmed garden work for you.

There's no reason why you, like me, shouldn't farm your garden, make the world a more beautiful place, and feed the bees while you do it. Good luck and good gardening!



The blank canvas – the freshly fenced-off acre of a field – may be an exciting start to building your dream, but can be rather daunting in its emptiness. The trick is to chop your space into carefully planned, manageable chunks, and all of a sudden you’ll have a strategy. Plant your ideas one small seed at a time, and watch them grow and bloom.



The first cutting patch at Common Farm, which was cleared by pigs. Note the soon-to-be wind-protecting curve of native hedging settling in among the buttercups.

You need surprisingly little space to create a really productive cut-flower patch. At a lesson I taught in Northamptonshire recently, we assessed an ordinary-sized domestic garden space and identified a patch of the vegetable garden that would happily turn itself over to flower production.

In a bed of about 3m x 3m (10' x 10'), we saw room for perhaps 15 sweet pea plants, five ammi, five cosmos, five dahlias, five sunflowers, a row of cornflowers, a row of pot marigolds and a row of hare's ear. There were already roses in a herbaceous border edging the vegetable patch, and the herbs growing at the other end of the garden would make lovely scented foliage for the grower's posies. Among the group I was teaching were two garden designers, a florist, a baker, a writer, a lady with an allotment who wanted cut flowers for her house, and another who wanted to sell mixed bunches from her front gate. None of these people would call themselves 'eco-warriors' – they were simply sensible people who had looked at the international cut-flower trade and didn't like what they saw. They realized that if one is a gardener of any kind, one can grow cut flowers – which will not only satisfy the aesthetic desire for cut flowers in the house, but also feed the bees.

So, you have your dream – or even your patch, your meadow, your corner of a rented field. It's time to lay out your plot. Go and stand in it, sniff the wind, test the earth, and think hard before you apply the sharp edge of spade to soil. The better planned your plot is, the harder it will work for you.

Plot design and practicalities

Whether you're planning a single bed for small-scale growing or several acres for commercial production, the same design rules apply. Think carefully about how you will lay out your patch, and you will save yourself time, energy and (most of all) irritation later on. A carefully planned garden will reward you time and again for the work you put into getting the mechanics of it right.

How much space?

If you're growing to sell at your gate, at farmers' markets or to local florists, beds of 3m x 1m (10' x 3') will never be too long to walk around or too wide to reach across without treading on. It's a good idea to begin with one bed cut into three (or three whole beds, and so on), since if your beds are divisible by three, you're set up for a plant rotation system (see page [21](#)). If you then lay out another bed to the windward side of your first bed, to help with wind protection (see page [19](#)), you are ready to plant a substantial crop in three annual beds and one perennial – all possible in less space than the size of an average allotment.

Cutting your space up into small sections also makes the job less daunting for any grower, as you can achieve great things by dealing with one small section at a time. A great ploughed plain before you is daunting, whereas a series of small areas that can be dealt with one at a time is a list of surmountable challenges.



Our first flower patch – about the size of three allotments – provided enough for us to run plenty of market stalls and do five weddings in that first year.