



LIVING LOCAL

MASTERPIECE FLOWER FARM

Written by Chandler Joiner

Masterpiece Flower Farm is a flourishing mother daughter cut flower production farm on the outskirts of Whaleyville, Maryland. Crystal Giesey and her mother, Misty Fields, began growing flowers as a hobby, and four years ago they decided to turn their passion into a business venture. In the beginning, they sold their flowers at just one farmers market, and have since grown to selling to four markets a week during season, one market year-round, and complete a multitude of wedding orders. This impressive enterprise operates out of two properties, the first – where Masterpiece began – is on Misty's house property; the other was a nearby field purchased to help expand their business. This originally fallow four-acre field has required years of time-consuming cultivation, uncertain investment, and a lot of family dedication to transform it into the blooming landscape it is today.

When I sat down with Crystal in the Masterpiece shed on a dreary afternoon, I learned for the first time about the intricacies of cut flower production and the sheer commitment Crystal and her mother have to their business and their land. Before understanding the practices Crystal and her mother employ, it is important to understand that in cut flower production everything is done by hand. Crystal explained, "We lay our landscape fabric by hand, we burn holes in the fabric by hand, we plant everything by hand, we weed by hand, we harvest by hand. It is all manual. There are no mechanized tools to plant, harvest, or anything."



Crystal with Tulips

This became even more impressive after learning about the number of plants Masterpiece produces. "We are at about thirty five percent perennials, and the rest is annuals. We do bulbs, tulips, muscari, fritillaria, and daffodils. Daffodils are treated as a perennial and tulips are treated as an annual. We do have some "woody" on our property – hydrangeas, nine bark, ilex – that we use and cut. We have a little bit of pepperberry and nandina, but we grow mostly annuals. Ranunculus and anemones are our major spring crop. We also have 250 peonies, that is our perennial. We grow lots of annuals in the summer – sunflowers, snap dragons, scabious – we have about a hundred different varieties that we grow."

For those unfamiliar with plant terminology, a perennial plant is one that continues to grow year after year while remaining dormant throughout the winter. Peonies are a perennial for Masterpiece. "We planted them almost two



FARMER CRYSTAL GIESEY

Co-Founder of Masterpiece Flower Farm

two years ago and we won't be able to cut from them for probably another three years. But we do have sixty peonies on my mother's property that we cut from every year." An annual flower is typically planted in the spring or summer months, blooms for the season, and then, unlike the perennial, dies. Although annuals require more work and attention, perennials generally require less care. However, they often do not bloom for several seasons after they have been planted. Woody plants are plants that have hard stems, meaning wood is its structure tissue (ex: trees and shrubs), and are usually perennial plants. "Woody's are more of a long-term investment, when you plant, you are not going to be cutting right away. It will probably take a good five years to get going, but they will be something that will really impact our business long term."

On the Eastern Shore, the blooming season is typically March through November, but Crystal explained that this has been changing throughout the years. "This year, my first succession of ranunculus at the size they are now [end of January 2020], is the size they were at the end of March last year. This time last year, they were just coming up. They are two months ahead of schedule." Crystal acknowledges that the planting seasons are changing because of changes in the climate. "I will say that the climate has changed. I can see that; I am out in it every day. We have warmer winters and colder colds. This winter has probably been the mildest we have had in my memory." Crystal recognizes these changes, such as seasonal temperature increases and increase in rainfall, and she has taken steps to mitigate the impacts. "We have changed ways in how we farm to combat these climate challenges. Because we lost all of our dahlia tubers from rain and rot from the year before, we dug trenches between all of our rows last year. We made them approximately a foot deep, that way if we did get nine inches of rain in two hours again, that water could drain off into those trenches rather than just sit in our beds."



Dahlia Flowers

Many people do not realize the work that goes into cultivating a successful dahlia crop, and the 2019 rainstorm Crystal is referencing in her previous quote was devastating for the crop. The root of a dahlia is called a tuber. The tuber resembles a lumpy bunch of brown carrots, and dahlia stems sprout directly from the tubers. When Masterpiece was hit by the aforementioned rainstorm, they lost their entire 1,500 dahlia crop, and the tubers are something they save every year. "After planting the tuber, you must successfully grow them, and they cannot get too much water, or they will rot. Then you stake them, and they need a lot of care through the season. At the end of the season you must dig up every single tuber and store them in crates at about fifty degrees in the dark. If it gets too warm, they dry out, and if it gets too cold, they will rot."

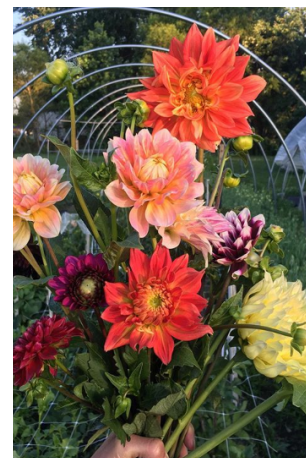
DID YOU KNOW?

Rain barrels capture water from a roof and hold it for later use such as on lawns, gardens or indoor plants. Collecting roof runoff in rain barrels reduces the amount of water that flows from your property. It's a great way to conserve water and it's free water for use in your landscape. Visit the following link to learn how to install your own rain barrel!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfORD5kZhmk>

Losing this stock was a setback for their business. Overall, drainage was a big issue for them in the beginning because of permitting issues, and the rainstorm only exasperated the issue. "In the beginning, I was bringing rain barrels full of water in my van to water crops, and then it went from being super dry to super wet. We went from not having enough water to having too much. It was a super rainy season, so we dealt with rot a lot in the beginning.

Crystal and her mother persevered through these challenges because they care deeply about bringing joy to their community by providing cut flowers in the most environmentally conscious ways possible. According to Crystal, everything on their farm is grown as sustainably as possible. "We use organic methods, we don't spray – even with organic measures – unless we absolutely have to, such as if we are going to lose an entire crop. Last year, we did not spray at all."



Dahlia Flowers

They use a variety of organic methods on their property in order to have successful cultivation. “We do a lot of mix of no-till and till. We have only been cultivating this particular property for two years. It was a blank slate when we began, so we did have to till. We are constantly mixing in a lot of organic matter; we are always trying to build up the organic matter in the soil. We put down about three big dump truckloads of compost last year.”

Crystal’s number one recommendation for maintaining the health of the land is soil testing. “Soil tests are super important, and you cannot just do one, you have to do multiple all over your property. One area might be doing really well, and one area might be doing poorly. If you are going to be adding compost to your soil, it is really important to do those tests!” Soil tests are important for a multitude of reasons, such as optimizing crop production, protecting the environment from runoff contamination and leaching of excess fertilizer, and improving the nutritional balance of the soil. Soil tests can help farmers save money and conserve energy by aiding in determining a sound nutrient management plan.

Masterpiece is also working to contribute to their soil’s health through succession planting. Succession planting is essentially staggered plantings – planting the same crop at different times – and each time a crop is finished you pull it and plant a younger one. “When one crop is putting out, we are putting in another during that season. Every time we do that, we lay down more compost because we are trying to build the soil up and make it healthier,” said Crystal. Mending soil by adding well-made compost will always help alleviate soil deficiencies and contribute to more vigorous plant growth. In the short time Crystal and her mother have been working with the land, they have already seen beneficial changes. “You cannot dig up a single patch of soil without seeing earth worms. The worm population in the soil is just insane.” Worms are vital to soil health because they help with aeration and increase the amount of air and water that gets into the soil. They break down organic matter and when they eat, they leave behind castings, or waste material, that are a valuable fertilizer for plants. Worms also help to “turn” soil by bringing down organic matter from the top and mixing it with the soil below.

Throughout my time with Crystal, I learned that sustainability is always at the forefront of her mind, whether it is regarding her plantings, or the business itself. “When we started out, it was just us and a shovel and a little rake. Since then, we have taken all the money we made from the business and we reinvested it to scale up. We have invested in equipment and tunnels and the endless things you need to do what we’re doing.” Although this reinvestment is vital to continue growing, but that means they have not been taking home any paychecks. “Up until last October, I was still working full time. Last October, I made the leap to go full-time on the farm and not work a job on top of the farm.” As she continues to invest her time, money, and heart into Masterpiece Flower Farm, Crystal would like to encourage the community to buy flowers domestically, seasonally, and purchase with conscious consumerism. “Be aware of where your flowers are coming from and spend your money with farmers who, like me, have families and are local market garden farmers. When you buy locally, you are not supporting a giant corporation, you are supporting myself, my husband, my three-year-old, and my mother.”



During my interview with Crystal, I came to understand how important it is for the community to remember that locally grown products extend far beyond fruits and vegetables. There are many farmers and small business owners throughout the Coastal Bays community that rely heavily on the support of community members like you. As we face an unprecedented time in our society, I encourage you all to learn about these inspiring businesses and support your neighbors by buying local when possible.



Masterpiece Flower Farm products can be found year round at the Salisbury, MD farmers market and throughout the summer at the Lewes, DE, Bethany, DE, and Berlin, MD farmers markets beginning in May. For further inquiries, please contact Crystal via the Masterpiece website, www.masterpieceflowerfarm.com, or via their facebook or instagram.

 @masterpieceflowers