

Urban centers, streets, and backyards are producing flowers by the bouquet-ful, thanks to enterprising flower farmers who are creatively maximizing production in the smallest of spaces. Meet three flower growers who have what it takes to cultivate a crop—and a flower farming business—in a modern urban setting.

BY JULIE MARTENS FORNEY

GROWING FLOWERS



WHEN IT COMES TO FOOD PRODUCTION,

microfarms are well-known, well-received, and often well-publicized. Who can resist the lure of locally grown food? In food agriculture, a microfarm is defined as growing on less than five acres. Of course, the explosion of locavorism has tightened that figure, with smaller farms that focus on sustainability, efficiency, and maximizing productivity sprouting in many urban centers.

Flower growing mirrors this trend, with producers raising flowers in side yards, front yards, and unused gardens. These farmers enter the field for a variety of reasons, many of which are quite personal.



FACING PAGE: Beautiful crops like these spring marigolds start with healthy soil. “I’m consistently putting back into the soil what I’m taking out. At the end of the spring season, I cover-crop with cowpea and buckwheat,” Moreland says.

LEFT: Snapdragons are one of Moreland’s most productive early spring cuts. Spring in Florida runs from the end of January to mid-April. Two or three sowings in succession—starting in mid-September—keep up a supply of snaps, including for her Valentine’s Day CSA kick-off.

IN THE CITY



That’s definitely the case for Dee Hall Goodwin, owner and chief bucket washer at Mermaid City Flowers in Norfolk, Va. “When I was looking for locally grown flowers for my own wedding, I couldn’t find any, so I thought I could be that farmer couples are looking for,” she shares. “I also wanted to live where I work.”

Norfolk’s rich agricultural history inspired Hall Goodwin, who realistically notes that “the city here is urban—and not known for its farmland.” Five years ago, she started her farm on one-fourth of an acre in her front yard. Today, she farms on four separate plots—one at home and three in spaces about 10 minutes away.

For Lyndsey and Scotty Moreland¹, owners of Secret Garden Guru, Orlando’s city neighborhoods provide

the perfect opportunity for their budding business. “Returning to Florida after more than a decade living and gardening in the New York City/Tri-State area, I was ready to tackle the challenge of growing in an urban-suburban environment,” Lyndsey says. Previously, she grew flowers in raised beds in her concrete New Jersey backyard for 10 CSA members in New York City.

Moreland’s passion for flowers started with her mother’s garden and was nurtured by her love of art, which she studied in college. “At some point, I realized flowers were an expressive art medium. As someone who’s never had the luxury of space, I’ve learned to find inspiration and creativity in lean circumstances. Orlando has a rich history of urban microfarms for vegetable production, but no one

¹Both Lyndsey and Scotty Moreland are involved with the farm, but only Lyndsey was interviewed for this article.



FACING PAGE: The main growing plot for the Morelands in Orlando is in a side yard on a busy residential street. “I feel we can never grow enough for the public here. The demand is simply incredible,” Moreland says.

BELOW: Lyndsey and Scotty Moreland microfarm across three plots totaling one-quarter acre. Their business model runs roughly 60 percent CSA, 40 percent weddings. *Photo: Mary Fosky*



was locally using this model for flowers. So far, it’s been successful for us and provides a great way to be rooted in the community.” The Morelands’ microfarm currently thrives in three yards—their own, plus two others.

In Tulsa, Okla., sisters Ellen and Laura Weatherholt are the visionaries behind Posegate Farms. As fourth-generation farmers, they’re continuing the family legacy. Ellen is a farm owner and lead educator with degrees in horticulture and botanical garden leadership. Laura’s degrees in landscape architecture and marketing serve her well as chief marketing officer. Both sisters are experienced floral designers.

Posegate Farms occupies two yards in downtown Tulsa: at Ellen’s home and a property their parents bought for rental income. “We rent the yard from my folks’ rental,” Ellen explains. Laura adds, “The renters who live there love that they have a flower farm in the backyard.” The sisters also tend perennials at a third location. “We decided to settle in town because we’d have to drive 45 minutes to reach affordable land,” Ellen says. “We settled for smaller and closer—and we’re maxing out every square inch of that space.”

FIND LAND, GROW FLOWERS

That pretty much sums up the mental focus of these microfarmers. Their desire to grow flowers, coupled with the demand for local product, drives them to farm in unusual spaces. For all of them, planting flowers began at home. For Lyndsey and Scotty, their personal property is a hybrid setup of production-style raised beds and mature, established perennial plantings that Lyndsey uses heavily in her wedding design work. This approach helps farming continue in Orlando’s rainy season, which can leave up to six inches of standing water in their backyard.

The couple’s main growing space stems from a relationship with farmers-market-turned-wedding clients who have become close friends. “It was very organic. They loved what I was doing at the time with local flowers and asked me to take over their side yard for all my growing needs,” she says. She’s been in that space for four growing seasons. A recently added space was offered by a fellow small business owner who wanted her backyard planted, productive, and enjoyed during her maternity leave.

To request additional space, Moreland uses her newsletter to make an all-call to the community. The couple is always conservatively considering adding another plot, provided it meets their criteria for success.

Hall Goodwin also started growing in her own yard, which opened the door for conversations with passersby. “I wanted



SEVERAL THINGS MAKE THE MORELANDS' MODEL WORK WELL, INCLUDING:

- Plots need to be close to home or within a 10-minute drive.
- Homeowners are someone they know and trust, and who trust them in return.
- Spaces offer full sun and access to water (the farm reimburses for usage).
- Homeowners understand what a working farm involves, such as tilling, or not always looking beautiful.



to be able to use my space as a teaching tool by being in an environment where people could see what was happening,” she shares. “I could be a real-time advocate for local flowers.” She currently grows in four yards. “It’s an unusual use of community land sourcing. People come to me now offering their yards, and sometimes I put out a call on Instagram. One neighbor had seen something on PBS about land borrowing and posted on a local Facebook group, offering her unused raised beds. I’ve been growing there for three years now.”

With microfarming in an urban setting, customers know the flowers are local, and they know the grower, who’s often a neighbor. “Flowers provide a beautiful way to draw people in to discuss the U.S. floral industry or talk about climate,” Goodwin says. “None of us individually can do anything on a mass scale to roll back climate change, but I can show people what you can do on a tiny plot.”

As the Weatherholts search for land to farm, they’re keenly aware of matching site selection with required crop maintenance. For instance, annuals require more

care, so they have focused those at one location—the rental property. “We ultimately realized the more places our plants were growing, the more we had to take care of other people’s landscapes. Our goal is profitable flower farming, not being personal gardeners,” Ellen says.

This year, the sisters are being strategic about placing truly low-maintenance crops, such as 10,000 daffodils, at a friend’s house. “We’ll put a huge swath of daffodils in that yard, and there really won’t be any maintenance,” Ellen explains.

The sisters hosted their first-ever “Daffodil Days” event this year, hawking the namesake blooms along with CSA subscriptions and floral-themed artwork. “Our goal was to connect with customers after the winter and be the first touch of spring they experienced,” Ellen says. “It went really well, which is why we’re investing in major daffodil production for the future.”

Ellen’s house, which she shares with Laura, is home to seed starting and a growing botanical-garden-worthy collection of perennials, shrubs, and trees. “We’ve selected plants to provide year-round color without the



need for intense care,” Laura says. “We’re simply building a beautiful garden that will have these plants in place for years to come. It’s really been a victory for us to develop this strategy.”

CHALLENGES FOR MICROFARMS

With a flower farm spread out across town, it’s not tough to imagine that challenges arise. One of the most obvious is that each individual plot offers its own unique profile—of everything: soil, pests, pedestrian pressure, etc. Here’s a rundown of some challenges these flower microfarmers face.

Soil. “Being in the city, you have construction fill and 100 years’ worth of weird stuff people dump in the yard,” Ellen says. “The only thing our soil has going for it is that it’s very well-drained,” Laura says. “It’s pretty low in nutrients—not even Bermuda grass grows.” To improve the soil, the sisters tarp out any weedy grass and then add compost, paper mulch, and wood mulch. “Our best tool has been time,” she adds. “In just a couple of years, the soil is totally different.”

Hall Goodwin always brings in compost and raises the soil level when she’s starting in a new space. “It’s the easiest thing to do because when you dig, you don’t know what you’ll find with soil testing or even underground pipes,” she says. “There’s an infrastructure cost at the start with each site,

followed by amendments each year. In an urban environment, I’m paying to have amendments delivered to different sites since I don’t have a pick-up truck.”

Storage space. In addition to a lack of growing space, Hall Goodwin also faces a shortage of storage space, such as when digging and dividing perennials. “I have a ‘nursery’ outside my door where I can keep an eye on things before I transition them to various plots,” she says. She just added a cooler last year and purchased a second one from a florist this year. “Having that cool space—beyond my basement—is a definite plus,” she says.

The Morelands also recently acquired a small cooler. A mechanic by trade, Scotty found a small, used cooler on Facebook Marketplace and fixed it for a fraction of the cost of buying new. Having the cooler lets the couple harvest earlier and store larger quantities of product.

Pests. In Norfolk, there are no deer, but Hall Goodwin has other pest issues. “I have one plot where I find things like mussel or crustacean shells. It’s on the river, so I thought maybe birds were eating and dropping the shells. It turns out it’s raccoons,” she laughs. “They walk up the river bed at low tide and dig for creatures, having a snack in my garden bed.”

She also deals with rabbits at that location, which she manages mainly through crop selection, growing natives, and perennials. The Weatherholts battle rabbits, too. “Last year we literally had one sunflower that grew—the rabbits got the rest,” Laura says. To solve the bunny crisis, the farm covers crops with cages made from anything they can repurpose. “It’s managing at a critical moment, when the critters do the most damage. If we can keep the rabbits off crops until the plants are tougher, it works. We just make sure we don’t plant everything at once,” she says.

For insect issues, Moreland has “really leaned into beneficials, and they have naturalized. We have predatory wasps, lacewings, and ladybugs at the main plot,” she says. “I sacrifice a plant or two to aphids early in the season to nourish the beneficials, and plant a few milkweed around to



draw them out of the flowers.” Being a small farm, hand picking caterpillars and worms is doable, as is applying Thuricide at the base of vulnerable plants.

Visibility. Moreland’s main plot in the corner side yard is on a well-trafficked, residential street. “We want people to enjoy our flowers and ask us questions, but also respect that it’s a working farm for our business. Striking that balance can be challenging,” she says. When the couple first started growing here, they had to temporarily erect no trespassing signs because people were entering the property to cut flowers and take photos. Those issues have abated now that the farm has been in place for a while.

Tools. “Even with our plots five minutes apart, it helps to have three sets of tools—one at each location—to prevent driving between properties to get things,” Laura says.

Time. Using time efficiently is vital for most microfarmers because they’re juggling full-time jobs with part-time farming. When crucial crops like tulips are nearly ready, checking on them multiple times per day at different locations is time consuming. “In 12 hours here, tulips go from showing a bit of color to being wide open. Balancing time for home and family life at times like that is tough,” Hall Goodwin says.

Moreland has the freedom to come and go from the properties she farms as she pleases, but prefers to make considerations for how she shares the space with the families who live there. “Sometimes I’ll need to fertilize or harvest, but it doesn’t feel right imposing on the homeowner’s private space, so I’ll decide to come back. We’re lucky the homeowners trust us completely.”

Strength. “Because we’re farming in town, we can’t use the tractor, so we have to be strong,” Laura says. The sisters go to the gym regularly to stay strong for bending and lifting. “It’s important to keep the core and lower back strong to do all the physical tasks that need to be done.”

MAXIMIZING PRODUCTION IN SMALL SPACES

One of the most important aspects of microfarming flowers is getting the greatest possible harvest from growing spaces. These flower farmers embrace different practices to push production over the top.

FACING PAGE: Dee Hall Goodwin started Mermaid City Flowers in her Norfolk, Va., front yard. Her crop mix focuses on adaptable, no-fuss plants, but will always include bachelor buttons. “They’re ridiculous to cut, but that cornflower blue is like nothing else to me,” she says.

RIGHT: “The joy of the locally made bouquet is having textures and aromas in it,” Hall Goodwin says. One of her favorites for designing is river oats, with its dangling seed heads. “It needs little care and does well in a damp environment.”





ABOVE: Mermaid City Flowers added an electric flower truck this year. “I wanted something portable for my flower bar that had a big cute factor,” Hall Goodwin says. “Basically, it’s a golf cart with a pick-up bed.”

FACING PAGE TOP: Farming runs in the Weatherholt family. Fourth generation farmer Ellen Weatherholt, with her father, Tom, are key players on Posegate Farms. Microfarming means using every space, including this little patch of land planted out with tulips.
Photo by Laura Weatherholt

FACING PAGE TOP: Posegate Farms in Tulsa, Okla., grows a colorful fall mum crop. Laura Weatherholt oversees marketing for the farm, with a little help from farm dog Ampy. The biggest challenge for this Oklahoma microfarm is weather-related issues.

Crop selection. Two aspects of crop selection come into play in microfarming: choosing which crops to grow and deciding which plants to grow at each location. In terms of narrowing what to grow, like any flower farmer, these microfarmers focus on crops that meet market demand and serve their business models. For Hall Goodwin and Moreland, wedding work makes up a large chunk of their business, so they focus on plants that work well in design. Both are planting more perennials and native perennials that are good for designing, more adaptable, and self-reliant.

When choosing what to grow, Ellen applies her gold standard: a plant that delivers fresh cut flowers, foliage, and dries in some form, which could be seedpods. One example is mountain mint. Laura cites peonies. “We pick as many as we can in bud stage, but if we miss some we leave them on the plants to make seed pods, which we sell at the end of the year.” The other big draw a crop can have is timing: providing blooms at a point when it’s the only thing available in town. Hellebores, now three years old, are hitting that mark at Posegate Farms.

Matching plants to tough growing conditions is Ellen’s superpower. “I love finding plants that will grow in the tough corners, like with deep, dry shade under mature trees. Most of the time, it’s perennials because they can handle the stress. Lily-of-the-valley is great for dry shade, and no florist can resist them,” she says.

Tight spacing. Moreland plants everything “really tight. Our main plot in the visible side yard has nine 21-foot-long rows that are two and a half feet wide. We have 10- to 12-inch paths between rows and six-inch spacing on drip for everything. We plant tight enough to maximize stem length and create enough space to keep plants healthy, pushing 184 plants per bed. That comes out to more than 1,600 plants when the plot is full,” she says.

Posegate Farms also applies tight spacing to drive yields. “We have 18 inches on peonies,” Ellen says. “We wouldn’t have anything to harvest if we followed 36-inch spacing.” Ellen and Laura also try to plant out every single area they can on the properties. Bulbs fill the tiny strip of land crammed between the house and sidewalk. Annuals like poppies and zinnias get tucked between young perennials—“that’s one of my best landscaping tricks,” Ellen says.

Pinching. Part of Moreland’s process to maximize stem production is planting varieties that branch when she



pinches. Snapdragons are a good example. “With pinching, I get six to eight stems per plant, with two or three flushes. That means we get more than 1,000 stems per flush,” she says. “It’s a high-producing base.” She also harvests daily, along with deadheading and pruning aggressively to make sure every plant is producing quality stems when she needs them. “I also use a lot of support structures and netting for really tall plants,” she says. “Otherwise, a storm can flatten the bed.”

Fertilizing. Pushing plants through nutrition requires balancing plant health with sustainable practices. Every time Moreland flips a bed, she amends the soil with organic compost and organic granular fertilizer. “I apply a fish emulsion foliar feed weekly throughout the growing season until plants reach budding stage. At that point, I switch to Alaska Morbloom fish fertilizer, which I spray on plants,” she says. “I monitor everything closely, adjusting practices as necessary. For the most part, plants stay healthy with limited pest pressure.”

Business model. All flower farmers wear many hats, but for microfarmers, juggling multiple sales outlets is mandatory. “When growing on a small scale, it’s important not to hyperfocus,” Goodwin says. “Instead, cast a wide—but not too wide—net at the beginning. Experiment some, but realize it’s okay to be at your scale. I’m scaling up out of necessity, but not chasing it, so I can retain some balance.” She’s really enjoying the teaching portion of her work: workshops, talks, and demonstrations.

Last year, Posegate Farms’ number-one moneymaker was education. Ellen teaches in partnership with local garden organizations, conducts workshops with the summer library program, and as part of the farm’s activities. “With workshops, I can use whatever flowers I have, which is the best way to use our florals and experience,” she says.

“I’m considering how we can maximize our talents and expand our community in that sense. Maybe it’s finding the right partnerships in town



Ellen, above with Tom, and Laura try to plant out every single area they can on the properties. Bulbs fill the tiny strip of land crammed between the house and sidewalk. Annuals like poppies and zinnias get tucked between young perennials—“that’s one of my best landscaping tricks,” Ellen says.





or producing on-demand online classes for Southern growers. Our dates—for seed starting, plug ordering, and planting—are so different from the rest of the country. Some plug producers don't even produce plugs when we're ready for them."

SMALL FARMS WITH BIG DREAMS

No matter how tiny these microfarms are, the owners all have hopes and dreams worthy of the biggest flower farm. The Morelands were married last year, and Scotty has become an integral part of the business, from tilling to sowing to designing. The couple hopes one day to have their own property dedicated to flower production.

Their advice? "Be bold, creative, scrappy, and persistent. If we can do this, anybody can. Learn what makes your approach unique and lean into what does well for you," Moreland says. "If you can be efficient with certain aspects and embrace creativity with others, it's a good mix."

The harsh reality is that "most flower growers don't make it past Year 4," Hall Goodwin says. "It's more work than people realize. But if you can be flexible and adaptable, those are pretty good tools for any farmer of any size to have."

She is also firm about not holding onto things that don't work. "Farmers' market sales never took off for me in a great way, so I let it go. CSA subscriptions didn't bring great money, so I let those go. Instead, I'm offering workshop subscriptions this year." Hall Goodwin's workshop series—called "Bloom & Brush"—features art-inspired floral design that capitalizes on her design skills and gorgeous local florals.

The Weatherholt sisters aspire to share their love of flowers with the community. "We want to grow flower knowledge in Tulsa and reach our full potential on the properties we're on," Laura says. Ellen agrees, saying, "The microfarm way is finding those little niches and glimmers of opportunity where you can make your effort count. Our product is so ephemeral. Anything we can do to make it last is worthwhile, and that includes education, turning more people into flower lovers." ■

RIGHT: Ellen Weatherholt leads "Flower Mandala" workshops as part of the local library's summer reading program. The mandala theme adapts to any floral material. Ellen uses daylilies in summer, colorful leaves in fall, and greenery, twigs, and willow branches in winter.

