

Those flower bouquets sold uptown have a story to tell

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VALE Driving up the long unmarked gravel road leading to Jefferson Herr's flower farm, a thick veil of sweetly perfumed air fills your nostrils long before you see one of the six greenhouses groaning with varietal flowers.

Tucked alongside the Lincoln and Catawba County border about an hour north of Charlotte, Herr's Fresh Flower Farm sits on 13 acres cut into a hillside and is one of the largest local flower producers in the region.

The broad smiles and warm customer service of Herr, his wife Sheng Ying Yang, or one of their six children are instantly recognized by hundreds of Charlotte-area residents who patronize their flower stands at Yorkmont and Davidson Farmers Markets or their weekday uptown street corner at Third and Tryon streets.

Herr, 44, and his family have been fixtures on the retail flower scene for more than a dozen years, since Herr acquired his farm in 2001 about an hour north of Charlotte. Herr, or members of his extended family, have also sold flowers in markets in Hickory, Concord, Greensboro and at Charlotte's South End market.

Herr's flower displays are a riot of blues, pinks and reds that offer the promise of spring. They are prized for their large, full blooms and extra long stems that allow for the home designer to cut to just the perfect length depending on their application.

Journey to Charlotte

Herr and Yang, 43, are originally from the Southeast Asian country of Laos. They immigrated to the United States via Thailand in 1990 as Hmong refugees seeking a better life. Their first stop was Fresno, Calif., to be close

- Keeping cut flowers fresh

Herr's Fresh Flower Farm uses a special tool when cutting flowers in the field to prevent crushing the stems and allows for stripping lower leaves in one "pull." This allows them to continue to draw water into the bloom and maintain freshness longer. Here are a few other tips to keep your blooms looking their best as long as possible.

- Cut the stems at a slight angle once you get your flowers home, taking care to avoid crushing the stems. A sharp scissors or pruning shear for the garden works best. Place in fresh room-temperature water. The fresh cut will encourage the flowers to draw water into the bloom.

- Strip off all leaves/foilage that would be underwater in your vase. These mold and grow bacteria in the water quickly and compromise freshness.

- Changing the water every day in your vase will help your flowers stay fresher longer.

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to relatives. Then came a move to Milwaukee, where Herr worked as a machinist and Yang balanced English lessons in an adult school with raising a young family.

Relatives in Statesville led the couple to relocate their family to the western Piedmont and they have never looked back.

Herr and Yang gained their agricultural skills in their homeland and have refined them since coming to the states. Yang grew up on a farm where they grew flowers, and after coming here from Milwaukee the couple had an opportunity to also build on the knowledge of relatives growing flowers in Statesville.



“We are very dependent on the climate and learned through experience which flowers grow successfully in this climate,” Herr said.

What was once a seasonal operation where all the flowers were grown outside has slowly given way to the building of six greenhouses and the ability to grow/sell year-round.

Herr even has two of his greenhouses heated, and in 2011 was the recipient of a Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) grant in support of these efforts. RAFI is a nonprofit organization that works with family farmers and supports replicable projects that affect the larger community and contribute to economic development.

By heating his greenhouses, Herr has expanded his ability to provide freshly grown flowers all year and added months to his season.

80 bouquets on a Friday

Customers flock to scoop up their custom-made bouquets, savoring the same-day-cut fresh Snapdragons, Sweet Williams, Peonies, Xenias, Lisianthus, Lilies, Iris, Bachelor Buttons or dozens of other varieties. The extra large bunches are hand-grouped to customer preference and start at \$10.

“Our larger \$20 bunches seem to be the most popular with uptown customers,” said Herr, who can be seen most weekdays at his post across from Wells Fargo at Third and Tryon. “I have as many male customers as women and it makes me happy to see their face light up knowing that their gift of flowers will be appreciated.”

It’s not unusual for Herr to sell more than 80 bouquets on a typical Friday afternoon. His cousins are not far away with a similar stand at Trade and Tryon.

Yang and her daughters are the face of the family farm at the Charlotte Regional Farmers Market at Yorkmont Road, where they sell Wednesday through Saturday.

“I recognize many of the same customers every week,” Yang said as her eyes gleamed and her face lit up. “We’ve even done many weddings for people we’ve met at the market.” Yang pulls out a photo album stuffed with photos of flowers in bloom and exalted customers sharing wedding pictures that feature her flowers.

"I get two types of joy," she said. "Seeing the flowers as they grow and bloom in the soil, and then again when they bring smiles and happiness to our customers."

In addition to selling at retail locations, Herr's flower farm supplies some area florists and wholesalers with their abundant crop.

Their entire operation, including an extra large one-acre-plus garden with their own rice paddies is worked by Herr, Yang and their children.

Other relatives pitch in when needed.

"This is our life," Yang said. "This is what we know and what we love. We are very happy."



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