

A blooming business

Fitterer designs floral makeups for farmers markets

BY SARAH COLBURN
STAFF WRITER

Cannon Falls—When Brenda Fitterer received a bucket of Iris tubers from a neighbor in Randolph back in 1999, it launched her love affair with gardening.

As her kids got older Brenda debated her next venture and in 2021, founded Hillside Blooms. Today, the cut flower maven has 40,000 to 60,000 flower stems growing in preparation for them to take root in colorful bouquets she crafts for her customers.

"There's something

about having flowers in your home that lightens your day," she said.

She's planted the flowers in neatly-tilled rows with her husband Steve, and they cover roughly 1/2 an acre.

"They're very compact, they don't take up much space," she said.

She begins her growing season each winter, scanning through internet catalogs of flower seeds. She works in color palettes, choosing flowers that will look best together in spring, summer and fall. She incorporates sunflowers for the seasons, beginning with buttercream and lemon blooms and migrating to chocolates, plums and deep oranges later in the year. The same holds true for her other blooms, she plants for the seasons.

"People are looking for a great flower with great vase life but they're also looking for

something different," she said.

She grows things like Zinnias but they're not ones customers would normally find in their garden or local florist shop. She chooses things like Nigella, also known as Love-in-a-Mist.

"It's an unusual flower but people are drawn to it because they haven't ever seen it before," she said. "There's a lot of variety in my fields that people haven't ever seen."

She said while Snapdragons are a great constant, most people haven't seen Lisianthus. When it comes to sunflowers, she plants 14 different varieties.

"They haven't seen a Corn Cockle," she said. "I focus on vase life first and then unusual plants."

She has a method to her creations, each bouquet she hand-crafts includes focal flowers, spikes, filler and interest. She begins with those categories and as she's choosing seeds, she makes sure she covers them all, thinking of various palettes and the multitude of ways they can be combined for the various seasons.

She charts out everything, builds in 20 to 30 percent



(above) A tiny bee works its way through a Bachelor's Button flower at Hillside Blooms in Cannon Falls.



(Above) Snapdragons are a staple in the bouquets Brenda Fitterer creates at Hillside Blooms. She offers her bouquets through local farmers markets.



(Left) Brenda Fitterer has grown more than 10,000 flower plants from seed for her Hillside Blooms fresh cut flower business. The flowers take up roughly half an acre and their starts are shown here. A second field houses Fitterer's sunflowers.



PHOTOS BY SARAH COLBURN
Brenda Fitterer holds a collection of her flowers from her garden June 24 at her home near Cannon Falls. She wanted to start making floral arrangements to bring life and beauty into customers' homes.

more than she thinks she needs and then toward the end of January, she starts her seeds. Steve created a grow room in the third stall of the couple's garage using PVC and plastic sheeting. He's also created rolling tables to use for hardening off seedlings, as well as a modified old mower he transformed into a wheeled fertilizer system to use when the plants hit the fields.

Brenda starts nearly everything from seed in the grow room though there are some things, like specific varieties of sunflowers, that she direct-sows into the ground for better performance. She really ramps up her seed planting by March.

Last year, she grew stems to sell at the local farmer's markets to get her name into the public. She's at the Goodhue Farmer's Market on Wednesday and the Cottage Grove Farmer's Market on Thursdays. Her bouquets are also available at

the Ferndale Market in Cannon Falls.

Steve said customers often thought Brenda was cutting blooms from perennials or annuals around her yard and didn't understand how intricate the planning process truly is.

"People don't realize these are grown from seed," he said. "This is a field; this is purpose planting."

Brenda knows she needs to successfully grow about 10,000 plants, each one producing four to six useable

stems, to have enough for her bouquets.

During the spring and summer months she can be found working in the fields from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. in an attempt to avoid the heat of the day.

Fitterer page 4



PHOTO SUBMITTED
Brenda Fitterer revels in creating bouquets specially crafted for customers using unique flowers like this Lisianthus. She focuses on growing, cutting and creating bouquets out of flowers in a variety of palettes depending on the season.

MRF ATTACHMENTS
FARM TESTED FARMER INSPIRED

We have the attachments you need!

ROCK BUCKET GRAPPLE BALE SPEAR LAND LEVELER

STUMP BUCKET HYDRAULIC PALLET FORK 3 PT. GOOSNECK TOWBAR

Visit our website at www.messerrepair.com to see all of our attachments or call us at 320-352-3477

FREE SHIPPING!

Located 1.5 miles west of Saak Centre at 42739 County Road 184

320.352.3477 LIKE US ON FACEBOOK!

Messer Repair & Fabricating, LLC

CLEAR VIEW AG LLC

FROM SEED TO FEED WE KEEP YOUR GRAIN IN CLEAR VIEW

M-Hale
V6750
V8950
ROUND BALERS

Schäffer
COMPACT LOADERS WHEEL LOADERS

PÖTTINGER
RAKES MOWERS TEDDERS

TUBE-LINE TL50
The new generation of TL Series inline bale wrappers from Tube-Line are built to provide producers and custom operators with high efficiency and proven reliability. To ensure that everyone can reap the benefits of the high moisture hay, Tube-Line BaleWrappers are available in multiple configurations to suit your needs and your budget.

ROTO GRIND Tub & Grain Grinders

FINANCING AVAILABLE THROUGH DIRECT AND OVERSIZED FINANCIAL

-SALES & SERVICE - Daniel Showalter (641) 832-0361
www.clearviewagllc.com

Fitterer

from page 3

She cuts flowers first thing in the morning or in the evening when it cools to put the least amount of stress on the blooms. She places them in a bucket of water in a cool place and doesn't touch them for at least two hours, giving them time to rest before she begins arranging.

It's one of the rules she learned when she studied to be a flower farmer. She took a number of online courses and seminars to prepare herself for the business which she said is ever evolving.

This year, for the first time, she has 25 members who have signed up for her Community-Supported Agriculture or CSA. Those members buy a share in the crop, paying \$100 up front and in exchange, they'll each receive eight weeks of fresh bouquets available for pick-up at the field, a bouquet-making class and a tour. She opened her CSA slots in March and they filled within 24 hours.

Brenda hasn't always been a gardening and flower enthusiast. Before her passion bloomed, she was a bookkeeper and then a stay-at-home mom.

When the kids were younger, she and Steve wanted to teach them a good work ethic so the family planted a vegetable garden at their home in Randolph. They helped the kids put together a roadside stand and they filled it with goods from the garden nearly daily. A drop box allowed customers to help themselves and pay for their produce.

The kids used the proceeds as spending money



PHOTO BY SARAH COLBURN
Small plants peek out through holes in the biodegradable landscape fabric used at Hillside Blooms farm in Cannon Falls.



PHOTO BY SARAH COLBURN
Brenda Fitterer launched her second year of business with Hillside Blooms, crafting colorful bouquets for customers. She grows all the flowers from seed and works to pick unusual varieties to include in her hand-crafted creations.

after they set aside 10 percent to give to a local charitable organization, often one that provided Christmas gifts for families in need.

The Fitterer's grew and sold everything from spinach, leaf lettuce, beans, onions, beets, potatoes, cucumbers and carrots to fall pumpkins and squash.

The stand was popular and when the Fitterers moved to their current home in Cannon Falls, they closed up shop.

"We didn't realize the impact on the community," Brenda said.

People would often stop her and tell her how much they missed getting their farm-fresh produce from the stand.

That sense of loyalty, the sense of doing good for the community and her love for gardening is what prompted Brenda to start her flower business.

She's always enjoyed the farmer's market and that's why she continues to sell her bouquets there. This year, she plans to bring buckets of flowers and allow customers to choose their own stems and she'll create bouquets on the spot to their liking.

Fitterer page 5



PHOTO SUBMITTED
Brenda Fitterer starts all her own flowers from seed. Her husband, Steve, created this grow room in the couple's garage.

Fitterer from page 4

"I like interacting with the customers," she said. "And I think you just get to know them and their tastes a little bit."

Brenda creates roughly 100 bouquets a week, each consisting of about 20 stems. That's 2,000 stems a week, for 16 weeks of the summer, working mid-June through the end of September. This year she's also drying flowers to extend her season into October with some craft fairs.

"Then 40,000 stems doesn't seem unreasonable," she said.

Though she admits talking about the overall numbers and the multitude of the operation overwhelms her. She just works day to day. She takes special requests and orders via Facebook and does deliveries within a certain radius for a \$5 fee which covers the cost of gas.

"It's the commitment I've made to myself and the commitment I made to my customers," she said. "The drive to grow the business keeps me going when it's 100 degrees and I've been weeding. I look forward to those experiences, that's the fun part of it...when you knock on somebody's door and see the look on their face when you hand them that bouquet."

PHOTO BY SARAH COLBURN
A lily blooms in Brenda Fitterer's garden at her home near Cannon Falls.



PHOTO BY SARAH COLBURN
(above) These are the last of the seedlings to go in the ground at Hillside Blooms. Once these Rudbeckia plants harden off, they'll complete this year's planting.



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Brenda Fitterer of Hillside Blooms seeds in the Spring of 2022, beginning what will eventually become more than 10,000 flowering plants.

COUNTRY COOKING

Caramel French Toast Bake



French Toast

- 12 eggs
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 loaf French bread, 1-inch slices

Caramel Sauce

(will need 2 batches)

- 1/2 cup butter
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons light corn syrup

In large bowl whisk eggs, milk, cream, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg until consistency is smooth. (No egg whites visible) Over medium-low heat melt first batch of caramel sauce. Pour sauce on the bottom of 9X13 inch baking pan. Place one inch bread slices on top of caramel sauce. Pour half of egg mixture over the bread. Add second layer of bread, pour second half of mixture over the bread. Sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar. Let sit in refrigerator overnight. Remove pan from fridge 20-30 minutes before baking. Preheat oven to 350 F. Make second batch of caramel sauce. Pour sauce over French toast bake. Bake for 50 minutes. Serve while still warm.

Note: Be cautious of bread thickness, extra bread needs extra eggs to soak it up. It is possible to do one layer of bread by using thicker slices. You likely won't use the whole loaf of bread. The bread should be completely soaked by the morning.

RECIPE SUBMITTED BY GRACE JEURISSEN
Sauk Centre, Stearns County

HAVE A RECIPE YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE?
E-mail grace.j@star-pub.com