

# Luscious Garden Grows in Vases and on Walls of South Street New Business

## Lily of the Valley Floral Design Opened Last Month

By Regina Clarkin

A passerby at the newest retail shop on South Street might think the business is an art gallery given the spaciousness of the interior, wood floors, and colorful images displayed on white walls. The airy decor belies the focus of Lily of the Valley Floral Design and that's because founder Pam Johnson intentionally didn't want the business to look like a regular flower shop.

"As I began to think about it, I didn't want it to be an everyday floral shop. I wanted something to set me apart and showcase creativity and appeal to the five senses," said Johnson. "I wanted the ambiance of feeling like you're somewhere else, in an art gallery."

A visitor is immediately struck by the colorful photographs of flowers in frames and a selection of flower note cards, all created by Johnson. There are candles and Godiva chocolates for sale, and in the back of the long, well-lit space are the refrigerators, vases, clippers and wire that are the more typical tools of the floral design trade.

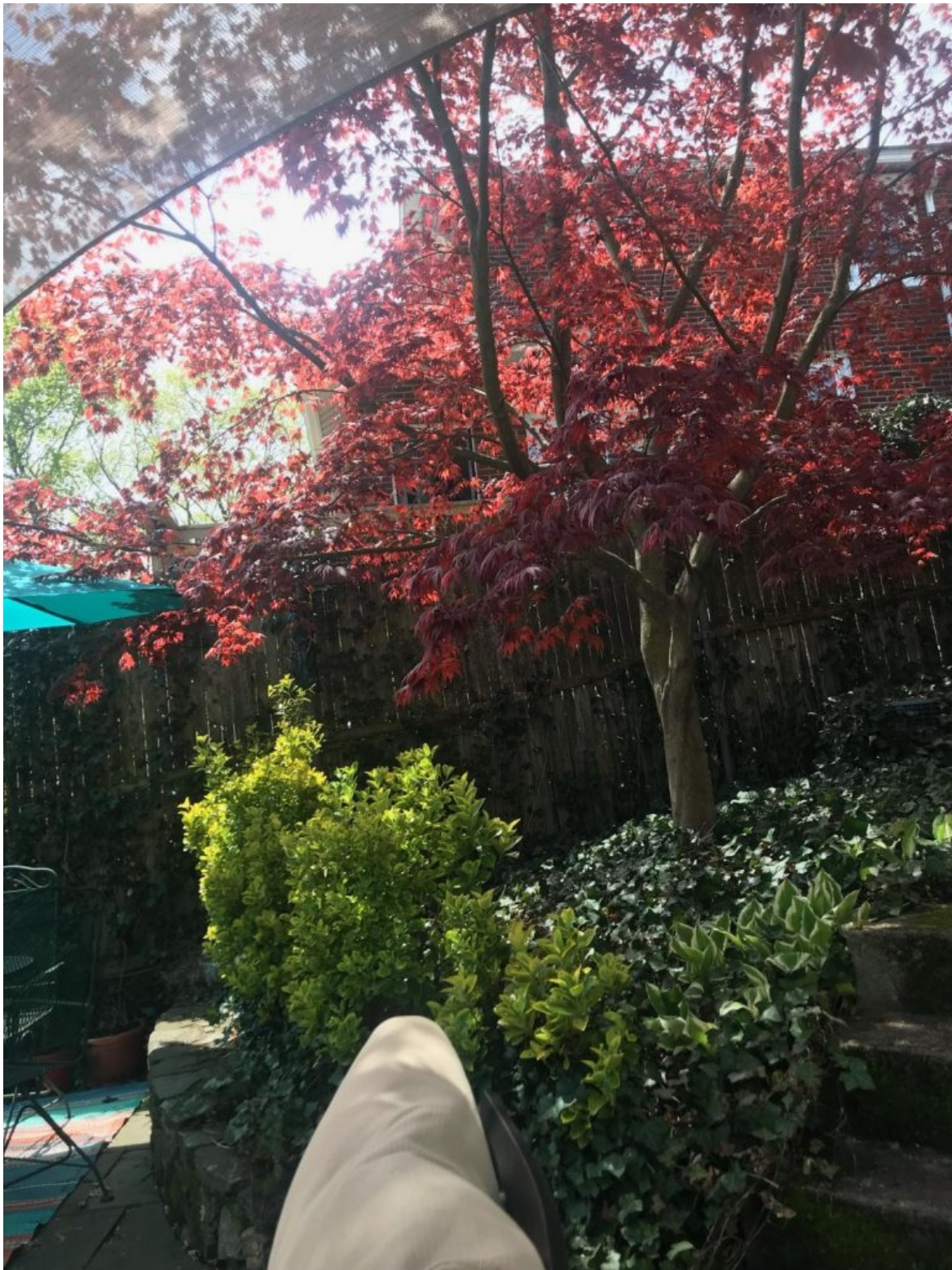




Framed photographs of flowers are available for sale. (Photo by Regina Clarkin)

Johnson, who is a Peekskill Board of Education trustee and a high school English teacher in New Rochelle, said owning a floral design business has been a dream for at least 20 years. It began when her mother-in-law relocated from her townhome in Mount Vernon, and Johnson and her family moved into the home, where there was a small Japanese maple tree in the front yard. Her mother-in-law told her to cultivate the tree. She watered the tree and ‘got the whole townhome complex involved’ in making sure it thrived. That ignited her interest in the world of trees and gardens. She decided to take courses at the New York Botanical Garden to learn flower arranging and began crafting designs for church events and weddings. She and her husband, Reggie, who is one of Peekskill’s City Court judges, and their three daughters moved to a home in Peekskill in 2003, bringing with them the Japanese maple tree that by now had grown to six-feet tall. “I designed our backyard around the Japanese maple,” Johnson recalled, adding that the tree that first inspired her is now over 15 feet tall.





The Japanese Maple now graces Johnson's backyard and shades her patio area.

For many years, she was happily arranging flowers for church affairs and weddings – until the day in 2018 when she was attending a women's conference of Enlightened Ministries International at Bailey Farms in Ossining. She provided the table centerpieces for the event which were seen by Vivian McKenzie, owner of Kathleen's Tea Room. "Vivian said to me, 'I'd like you to make arrangements for my restaurant', and now Johnson had another venue where her creativity could be on display.



Having run the business out of her home up to that point, she decided to sit at the Tea Room and make the arrangements for the tables there. “Sometimes there would be guests there and they were enamored of the arrangements. One of the guests was Nancy Cito who worked at Hudson Valley/New York Presbyterian Hospital, and she said she’d like me to make arrangements that the hospital would send to people.”

With a corporate client like the hospital, Johnson now found herself in the world of securing a legal identity for her passion and hobby which she soon named Lily of the Valley Floral Design. “I’m the daughter of preachers and I believe one of the names for Jesus Christ is Lily of the Valley. When we’re in challenges and experiencing going through a valley, He will be with you. Lilies grow in the valley,” she said. She also knows that lilies are the flower for the month of May, and that was a way to acknowledge the memory of her mother who had a May birthday.

Just as Johnson was determined to have her flower shop look like an art gallery, she was intentional about wanting to create floral arrangements for only happy events: weddings, baby showers, parties, restaurants. But that changed with her first request from the hospital for a sympathy arrangement, to be delivered on January 28, 2020 to New York City.

“Here I was delivering a sympathy arrangement for someone who had experienced a loss, and I was grieving the death of my brother who had passed that day. It was an awakening that shifted my perspective on what I wanted to do with my flower business.” She said creating a solace arrangement “gave me a heart of compassion for the bereaved. Sympathy is one thing. Empathy for another is what you experience when you’re going through it at the same time.”

This past summer, Johnson was still working from home, “where my air conditioning was the only refrigerator I had. Flowers were in the living room and kitchen, and I timed the deliveries from the wholesaler to be as close to the day as possible for when they needed to be delivered.” Before she had deliveries from a wholesale distributor coming to her house she was visiting the florist sections of local supermarkets.

“Nancy from the hospital kept my business alive for two years” said Johnson. “She told me to get a website, so I went to GoDaddy and learned how to create one.” Vivian McKenzie told me I needed to apply for a micro enterprise grant, and I told her I had never been able to get grants – but she was persistent and told me to apply.”



This floral display was an expression of sympathy that caused Johnson to reconsider her business goals.



Pam Johnson creating beauty with fresh flowers. (Photo by Regina Clarkin )

At this point, Johnson was getting used to taking instructions from the women who wanted to see her get her business off the ground. When Cito told her she'd need to get an EIN and DBA in order to be a vendor for the hospital, she did it. When she was told to get a website, she did it. When McKenzie told her to apply for the grant, she did it. Johnson tackled the grant application like it was a presentation for graduate school she said. "I made a portfolio of pictures, created a budget and used all the questions on the application to guide me in creating the plan." She submitted a 40 page proposal to the city's planning department and received a \$35,000 Micro Enterprise Grant through New York State's Homes and Community Renewal program, a part of Community Development Block Grants.



She learned on June 3rd that she was awarded the grant and could use it for rent and hiring two part-time staff and equipment. Her daughter Ashley is a part-time floral designer, and Martiza Roman, a native of Ecuador is the other designer. Her friend Cecele Quarles volunteers as the store manager and accountant for the business, while Quarles husband Mark does the deliveries as a volunteer. "I am blessed to have such friends," remarked an appreciative Johnson.

Her desire to create a non-traditional flower shop includes opening the shop up on Friday and Saturday nights to host Sip-n-Petal events where 4 to 8 guests come in for a two-hour evening. They arrive to a table set with china and food from the catering services of Kathleen's Tea Room. Guests enjoy food for an hour, and the second hour they create a fresh floral arrangement that Johnson leads them in making. The cost for the event is \$65 a person. "We've had two of them so far; they are girlfriends getting together for a night out," she said. "The events combine my love of flowers, food, and entertaining."



Guests from the first Sips-n-Petals event.

The average cost of an arrangement created by Lily of the Valley Floral Design is \$45, but "we meet every customer with what they want to spend," said Johnson who has four more years of teaching before she can 'retire' to her shop. Store hours at the 810 South Street location are: 10 am to 6 pm Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; 10 am to 5 pm Tuesday and Saturday; and Sunday by appointment. The store's website is [here](#).