

Bloom Where You're Planted

BY AUDREY PETERS

I have always loved flowers, but little did I know they would one day save me. Flowers dragged me out of a deep depression when I could not see what was in front of me anymore. Making flowers my creative focus seemed to happen effortlessly, and once I did the path seemed to open before my eyes. I have never felt so aligned before with what I was meant to be doing, and I am so grateful I found this calling.

As long as I can remember, I have been a creative soul, but my creative side remained fairly untapped until college, when I discovered I loved to draw and write. I have been inspired by many artist friends over the years, all of them serving as teachers to my soul, inspiring me to dig deep, be brave, ask big questions, pursue truth and authenticity, and continue on my journey of self-exploration, even through the most difficult parts of personal growth.

When I found myself well into my mid-30s, buried in work, parenting, and managing a home, I realized I had basically given up on any form of artistic endeavor. I knew something was missing, but I couldn't figure out what "it" was. When I had more time to myself, I made it a priority to look inward and open myself to possibilities, hoping to discover what my purpose was. I began to realize what was not working for me anymore and what was not bringing me joy. I made small changes, eliminating things from my life that were blocking me.

The biggest change I made was my career in psychology and special education, which was extremely emotionally draining. I had been expending all of my energy on others who were suffering, while at the same time neglecting my own needs. I began to prioritize myself for the first time in my life. I knew I was happiest when in nature, working with my hands, or creating something. Making the career switch to floral design was a huge turning point — it felt like taking a breath of fresh air. I began to feel alive again.

Looking back now, I recognize that I was severely depressed for years without knowing it. This change in direction was necessary and healing for me. Turning my back on any feelings of guilt or trepidation and going forward full throttle with my business enabled me to enter a new enlightened chapter in my life. ▸





I knew I would need a space to work in freely that felt safe and away from the judgements of onlookers. I needed a soft place to land, to acknowledge my creative soul that had been dormant for years. At first I had grand visions of an open-concept, light-filled barn studio with tall windows and high ceilings; I still have that vision, but building or renting that space would take a large amount of time and money. If I kept waiting for the ideal circumstances, my dream of owning my own business might never take flight — the time was now. *Even though I was not completely prepared, and didn't have the perfect studio setup, I decided to be brave and take the leap, follow my heart, and begin right where I was — and I've never looked back.*

I transformed a spare room in my home into my full-time floral studio. It's a small space, but it has beautiful natural light that streams in through a ceiling window and receives both morning and afternoon sun. The ceilings are high, with a loft for storage. I wanted the space to feel clean, minimal, soothing, dreamy, natural, and airy. I painted the walls and my workbench a soft cloud white, and incorporated soft cream, beige, and neutrals to create a calming vibe.

I strategically placed my workbench under the ceiling window to access the most natural light possible. Sometimes the lack of square footage can be challenging, so I try to keep clutter very minimal, only including the essentials in the studio. I utilize wall shelves as much as possible, and hang dried florals so they are within reach but do not take up floor or table space. There is also a closet in the room, in which I have fit a small dresser to store my collection of supplies. The loft space above is reserved for extra boxes, packaging, dried grasses and flowers, and other miscellaneous items used for wedding installations. There are also candles and pottery that I sell in my online shop, which are shelved in an orderly manner to keep track of inventory. A comfortable chair in the corner of the room provides a place for me to take creative breaks, breathe, listen, brainstorm, daydream, write, and sometimes meditate. ▸





Everything in my studio has its place, and this sense of order has helped me immensely. Sometimes things become disorganized the day before an event or holiday, but I've learned that this is a necessary part of the process. During the creative stage, I don't worry about making a mess, I just let things flow. The day after an event, when I return to survey the damage, I find it extremely satisfying and therapeutic to reorganize, throw out or compost, and wash the buckets and vases; this process provides me with a feeling of closure. Once the studio has been reorganized and cleaned, it feels like a beautiful fresh start, a new leaf — on to the next project!

My studio is a peaceful place I can escape to — it feels almost sacred to me. I do not do any administrative work in my studio, instead reserving it for a separate location outside in the hallway, where I have my computer and desk. Compartmentalizing my time and workspace has been a huge key to my success; scheduling my creative time separate from business mode helps me both visually and conceptually. I also try not to bring my phone into the studio with me because it is too distracting and I want that time to feel completely “unplugged.”

My favorite moment is when I enter the studio and shut the door behind me. *The ability to shut out the world and focus on myself, my thoughts, and creativity is crucial to my productivity.* I feel like I can tap into my true self when I am in my studio. I light candles, set my intentions, turn on some music, and dive into my work. These simple rituals help me to clear my energy and channel creativity.



My medium is nature, and I love all the different textures it provides. In my studio I create bespoke floral arrangements for weddings, events, business spaces, and custom orders. I work with both dried/preserved and fresh-cut flowers to create one-of-a-kind pieces, from dried bouquets and wreaths to hanging installations. I also do onsite installation, which is my favorite kind of project.

When I work with flowers, I allow the laws of nature to take the lead. Each stem bends in its own unique way, and I work with that so what I create is a co-creation with nature. Working with something so fragile, with a beauty so fleeting, is a creative experience like nothing else, emphasizing impermanence and the passage of time. There is such a small window of time between the moment a flower is cut and its final descent; some may find this depressing and tragic, but I find it beautiful. *Flowers have taught me to pay attention and be mindful of the present, which has healed me in so many ways.* I am forever grateful to the universe for bestowing me with this gift. ▶



In the past I had struggled with calling myself an artist. Even now, feelings of unworthiness pop up, but these are common fears that many artists experience. I think everyone is an artist in some way; some people choose to listen to that voice, while others are either too afraid or too distracted to tap into that part of themselves. It requires clearing up the mental clutter, listening to your inner voice, finding who you truly are, and accepting all of it, even the darker parts. When I came to that realization, I was freed to be myself and call myself “artist.”

Being a small-business owner can be terrifying — the fear of failure and the vulnerability of others seeing you fall. It requires thick skin, determination, and a pair of blinders. The best business advice I have received came from a business-owner friend who said, “Keep your eyes on your own page, don’t worry about what your competitors are doing.” I have learned to keep my mind focused on the end goal, and for me the reward is not monetary, it’s the pure, unadulterated freedom that comes with being my own boss; it’s a feeling I’ve never experienced before and it is truly exhilarating.



How to Follow Your Dreams

Without the “Perfect” Studio

- Start wherever you are and use whatever you have.
- Create near a window with great natural light.
- Make the space your own. Gather a few sentimental items and maybe a houseplant and candle.
- Keep a notebook and pen nearby for writing down ideas.
- Utilize wall space with shelves and hooks for storage. Create an orderly system. Use stackable baskets and bins for storing supplies.
- Periodically purge the space, removing anything you don't use on a regular basis; this clears the mind and leaves room for more inspiration.
- If there is a door you can shut, hang a “Do not disturb” sign on it while you are working. If you don't have a door, a room divider can provide you with a sense of boundaries.
- Visualize the studio you want one day, and write that down.



Having this little studio has opened a window to my creative soul, providing me with a space to create without judgement or stress or pressure to perform. Sometimes I think about the fact that one day I might have a bigger space, but I think I will miss this small, intimate studio — it feels like home to me.

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Photography by Angela Clifford (cliffordphotography.com) and Audrey Peters.





The Flower Path

BY LAYLA ROBINSON

“A place of exciting creative discovery just waiting to happen” — that’s what I feel when I walk into my studio. I feel it like a warm embrace, a mixture of calm, but also a sense of secret, unknown energy just waiting to be tapped into. I never dreamed of what a profoundly positive, uplifting, and freeing effect having my own proper workspace would have when I set my plans in motion to finally start building it just over a year ago.

As a small child, I grew up in the rural hills of Herefordshire, which borders the wild mountains of Wales, living in rented tumble-down remote cottages that were in abundance back then. Surrounded by an ancient landscape of unspoiled meadows and deep, rutted lanes with flower-filled verges, it was a magical place to grow up. Both my parents have always been creative, as were my grandparents, so the creative gene runs fiercely in my veins. At the age of 3, my parents separated, and one day my dad (who I missed desperately at the time) came to visit. He dug me a beautiful little round flower bed and planted it with bright-orange French marigolds he had brought with him. I think this poignant moment was quite possibly the start of my passion for flowers, which has stayed with me and grown stronger to this day.

Whether it was growing flowers, sewing, picking wild fruit and making jam, knitting, cooking, writing, carpentry, or just daydreaming up ideas, my life has always been filled with something creative. I am one of those people who has “ants in my pants,” and if there’s much of a lull in my life, I will be sure to dream up something to fill it pretty quickly — which sometimes I live to regret, but mostly I love. Life is busy, maybe a little chaotic at times, never very tidy, but certainly never boring!

These days, I create sculptures out of everlasting dried flowers, using flowers I have grown in my garden or that have been foraged from the hills and roadsides around where I live. These creations bring together the flowers I have loved from a young age, as well as growing plants, feeling inspired by the beautiful landscape around me, and making something sustainable that works alongside wildlife and nature — all brought together in an artistic way that is constantly evolving and being explored. ▸





After several years of creating on my kitchen table or in my sitting room, flowers hanging from the ceiling and every curtain pole, and now with three lively daughters running around, the working conditions were becoming unmanageable. I tried renting a studio for a few months, but it simply didn't work to have it away from where I live, as I often work odd hours and around my children. My brain began to itch with plans of how we could build a studio attached to our house — either that or give up completely. ▷



At the beginning of my flower-growing journey, I only focused on growing and using fresh flowers: turning over new soil on our 1-acre plot up in the hills, while my energetic and spirited young daughter ran around my ankles. This was at a time when garden-grown cut flowers were only just emerging as an exciting trend, and I couldn't think of a nicer thing to do with my new garden and young child; however, the reality ended up being quite different! Keeping up with the cycle of growing, cutting, and selling the flowers, along with the birth of my second daughter, plus living in a low-population rural area, was just not viable for a one-woman band. One great thing did stand out from this process, though: the winter-foraged work I had done, making things that lasted out of twigs and berries; this idea grew, and I decided to focus on this aspect entirely.





We took the plunge, and thankfully the studio turned out exactly like my vision, but I did have to lose a large new flower bed in the process. We built directly off the back of our off-grid three-bedroom cabin. Having a warm, dry space was essential for the storage of all my dried flowers, as they can't cope with even the slightest bit of damp. We started building in the spring of 2021, and even though it wasn't quite finished, I was able to start storing that year's harvest by the end of the summer and fully use it by the winter that year. This new space couldn't have come sooner, as my floral sculptures were really taking off and keeping up with commissions was more than a full-time job.

We designed and built the studio ourselves, with the help of a talented friend. We started off with a wooden frame, and added some reclaimed wooden double-glazed windows and doors that we bought from eBay. It has a corrugated tin roof and is clad in horizontal boards. There are large French doors along the western side that open out onto a wooden deck and allow brilliant access to my garden, plenty of windows facing flower beds on all sides, and a skylight to allow plenty of natural light. Inside, it has simple varnished plywood floors and neutrally painted plywood walls, which allows for plenty of hooks and hanging places wherever I want them. A solid fuel stove sits in the corner for the colder months, flanked by two very comfy vintage bentwood chairs to snuggle up in. In one corner is a pull-out bed that doubles as a couch and has storage underneath.



The studio is a bright, happy, warm space that feels welcoming and inviting. It can be adapted for the many different tasks required of my work, whether making very large pieces or laying out small, complicated work. It also doubles as a quiet place for my children to do homework, art, or even gymnastics at times, and for my husband to escape and play a bit of guitar. *The large windows looking out over my garden and the beautiful surrounding countryside are a constant inspiration while I work, even in the winter, with birds feeding on seed heads of spent flowers left standing just for them.*

A lot of my flowers hang from the rafters, but the majority are stored in a small dimly lit storage room. The room is lined with deep shelves that have many hooks on the underside for hanging tightly packed bunches of flowers to last the year ahead. It's a bit like a flower supermarket!

Along one wall of the studio is an old pine shop counter with several sets of drawers; it is old and battered, with lots of character. We bought it about 20 years ago from a closing-down sale of an engineer's workshop, and ever since we have been waiting for a space big enough for its 3-meter length. It was brought back to life by a lovely carpenter friend, and it is so beautiful! ▷









My Studio Favorites



- **Generally, I like working in silence**, as any noise can shut off my creative flow. On some days, however, especially if I have an abundance of energy, some music or an audiobook to listen to is just what I need.
- I **do yoga** once a week, which is good for grounding and reconnecting the body when I don't realize how detached I've become. This also helps with mental clarity.
- **Inviting friends** around to help or be involved. Having other people's perspective and energy is great for reminding me of my achievements, and really revitalizes any stale energy.
 - **Listening to music** that makes me feel happy and that's a bit "dancey."
- **Settling down and researching** new obscure flowers for drying, and then seeing if I can track down seeds. Etsy and eBay are great for this.
- **Keeping up** with my Instagram posts and community is always fuel for creativity. I've made some great connections and some fabulous friends from it.
- **Browsing seed catalogues** such as Chilterns Seeds, Plants of Distinction Seeds, Sarah Raven, or Green and Gorgeous seeds.



I am not one for routine; in fact, I would go as far as to say I feel stifled by it! I love the adventure of spontaneity and being flexible. Saying that, there is always a certain amount of organization that must happen to run a business and keep things happening on schedule. I always keep my workshop clean and tidy, ready for the next day's work and an uncluttered mind to start the day. Occasionally, there are days when the creativity just won't flow, which normally happen when I'm over-tired or things have simply been too hectic. On these days, I will still try to salvage some work so I don't stress about getting even more behind, but I try to make it very simple and rejuvenating, such as going for a walk and collecting bracken leaves, choosing seeds, or sorting a box of messy flowers; this way, I get to the jobs that need doing but calm my mind too, allowing the creative flow to switch off for a bit and recover.

I would always advise those who are still at the "kitchen table stage" and don't have a studio yet to keep on with their passion; there will be a way, even if you can't clearly see how yet. The frustration is real, so be kind to yourself, but with a true passion, a path will emerge ... trust.

Layla Robinson is the creator of beautiful, totally unique, everlasting flower sculptures from sustainable, organic, homegrown, and foraged flowers, from the hills of the Welsh borders near Hay-on-Wye. Learn more at laylarobinson.com and on Instagram (@laylarobinsondesign), Twitter (@laylarobinsonfl), Facebook (Layla Robinson Design), and Pinterest (laylarobinsondesign). She welcomes email at laylarobinsondesign@gmail.com.

Photography by Layla Robinson.



Nature Repurposed



BY AMANDA STARR BEAN

My road has never been straight and narrow. As I look back, it is quite clear that all my winding paths led me to this tiny, sun-drenched, flower-filled studio in the back of my home. Overlooking my gardens in a quiet neighborhood in Washington, DC., a wonderland of dried flowers and whimsical creations is where I come to work every day. My studio is scattered with vibrant blue vintage glass, various natural treasures, a rainbow of dried botanicals, and the lingering scent of drying flowers. While I never set out to create art from dried plants, like most of the great things in my life, my business, District Harvests, came about organically and quickly took on a life of her own.

Born with a collector's soul, I have spent most of my life searching for the beauty around me. The natural world was an integral part of my upbringing, and my family job was always the finder. I took my role seriously, and as a child I led my family on wild treasure hunts wherever we went for fossils, stones, arrowheads, or whatever the land offered. The harder something was to find, the more determined I was to find it. My collections grew and changed, for years tucked away, biding their time, waiting for me.

In January of 2021, I enrolled in a virtual herbalism course with Wilds Roots Apothecary. Studying herbalism made me question our relationship with plants, especially flowers. For most of us, flowers are beautiful but ephemeral. We are given a stunning bouquet that within days begins to wilt and is destined for the trash the moment it comes in our door. I was inspired to challenge this destiny, to move beyond the vase. I began to play with dried flowers, and my creativity, which had been bottled up during the pandemic, was released in a torrent.

Trained as an opera singer, music and performance were central in my life, and thus, so were flowers. I always dried my post-performance bouquets. Once I stopped singing, I continued drying plants; certainly not to the extent I do today, but even in the earliest days of District Harvests, there were dried flowers in my home with which I could experiment and play. ▸



By the spring of 2021, my kids had gone back to school part time. I reclaimed my small wooden desk that served as homeschool during the pandemic and moved it to our extra room, in a back corner under a window. I cleared off a few shelves and made room for books, the collection of whelk shells my parents had finally had enough of, and the jars I purchased to use as vases. I removed the blinds to let in more light and free up the windowsill surface. I ordered hundreds of seeds to expand my gardens. I scoured my neighborhood for any natural treasures I could find and carried them home to my little studio space where I began to create.



Rather than having a clear plan, I wanted to create, experiment, and learn. I knew with certainty that I wanted to use almost exclusively homegrown flowers, allowing District Harvests to be sustainable and hyperlocal. I was inspired by artists I found on Instagram, sometimes trying forms I saw, but always trying to capture them in my own way; some things worked beautifully while others failed epically. I kept drying and making, and before I knew it customers were buying my art. In the early days, my studio was a small corner of our extra room. The rest of the room was, and still is, play space for our children. By my desk sits a wall of built-in bookcases and behind me was my piano; all other available space was claimed by toys. As my operation grew, so did my space needs. We built another wall of matching bookcases on the other side of the room. The piano behind my desk became dried flower storage, and I hung one drying line under the back window.

My studio and my gardens are ever growing and ever evolving. *As my needs and business grow and change, so does my studio.* It now takes up about half of the room, but flowers and materials spill into almost all parts of our house. I now have three long drying lines, two shorter ones, and plans for more. Most of my flowers are stored on the lines, so walking into my studio is like entering an upside-down garden, a sun-dappled forest of flowers.



Now I have a larger work surface with more storage. It still sits under the window, where I store vintage books and flower prints, my most used tools, and tidbits that inspire me. My favorites are my grandmother's copy of "Leaves of Grass" and an hourglass from the most charming maker in Rome. I try to keep it at minimum, but there is always a tray of extra dried flowers on my desk. A folding bookcase moved in, as did an antique clothes horse, a wooden blanket ladder, and a vintage magazine rack; all are used as flower or material storage. The shelves are now lined with glass containers, shells, and other vessels. Works-in-progress and finished creations also dot the shelves until they are sold. The studio has a whimsical, vintage, slightly fairy-tale vibe. Like my work, you need to look carefully to take in all the details. >

My 10 Must-Have Studio Tools



1. Tweezers
2. Pruning sheers
3. Metal hanging clips
4. Glass cleaning cloths
5. Chicken wire
6. Flower frogs
7. Paintbrushes
8. Picture hanging wire
9. Vintage printer trays
10. Handheld vacuum (for cleaning up my constant messes!)





Every few months I reorganize my studio, with the goal of making it beautiful and inspiring but also conducive to efficient workflow. My best work comes when I have the time and space to experiment and play. While my studio is my workspace, it is also my sanctuary and my greatest work of art. It is the self-portrait of my soul and reflects all the things I love and all the things I am. ▷





As a lifelong creative, Amanda Starr Bean has pursued various different art forms. As the daughter of an environmentalist, the natural world has always been an integral part of her life, and now it is an integral part of her art. Amanda grows or finds almost all the plants with which she creates. When not in the studio, you can usually find her harvesting or tending to her overgrown city garden. Learn more at districtharvests.com and on Instagram (@districtharvests). She welcomes email at districtharvests@gmail.com.

Photography by Amanda Starr Bean.