





The Business of *Re-blooming*

Karen Ott Mayer | Photography courtesy of Marci Lambert

Since finding a new passion in cut-flower gardening, Margaret Stokes has become known on the local flower scene.

The Stokes residence in East Memphis appears like any other home with a neatly kept yard, fenced backyard and graceful architecture. Behind the fence, however, a growing ambition has taken root in Margaret Stokes who felt herself at life's crossroads when her mother died in 2016.

"I was close to my mother, and we remained close friends until she died." Now retired, Stokes spent 28 years as a speech and language pathologist, even once co-owning a monogram shop with her mother. With her mother gone, Stokes sought new inspiration and a path forward, which she eventually found in a place her mother loved: the garden.

"Mom had azaleas, planted narcissus and snowdrop bulbs, and grew perennials such as peonies, hydrangea, bleeding heart, and Lenten roses. She dried flowers and spent one year selling dried wreaths at the Germantown festival," Stokes remembers.

Following Washington farmer-florist Erin Benzakein on Instagram for more than a year, Stokes became intrigued with her signature flower growing methods. Founded in 2008, Floret Farm has garnered significant awards including the Martha Stewart American-Made Award. Benzakein's first book, "Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden: How to Grow,



Harvest & Arrange Stunning Seasonal Blooms” won the American Horticulture Society’s 2018 Book Award.

“I followed her because of her beautiful pictures filled with armloads of flowers,” says Stokes. Intrigued by Floret’s small scale/high intensity farming methods and sustainable, organic methods, Stokes enrolled in Floret’s online course in early 2018 to learn how to grow specialty cut flowers. During her first season, Stokes experimented with growing dahlias, stock, zinnias, sweet peas and cosmos because of their long vase life.

“Erin’s methods are effective for the beginner as well as the seasoned gardener. Flower farming like this is a very unique growing method,” adds Stokes.

Today, her backyard boasts an organized plan including growing beds and caterpillar tunnels. Stokes gets excited when she talks about how to bend conduit, her latest attempt to grow tulips or how she salvaged a refrigerated cooler from the curb that houses her harvest. During her first year, Stokes continued to experiment with flower types, how to harvest, how to cool and transport. In a short 12 months, she’s carried bouquets to Miss Cordelia’s in downtown Memphis, created centerpieces for local luncheons, and grown stunning amaryllis as Christmas gifts. Like life, the garden has its ups and downs.

“The greatest challenges were not knowing how much to water. I drowned my first round of Dahlias!” She

persevered through bugs, limited sunlight and humidity. She is still experimenting but choosing seeds more carefully, especially those which can produce all season versus just one bloom period. “I love that so many flowers are categorized as “cut and come again” which means that the more you harvest them, the more they will bloom.”

In late 2018, she ventured into growing anemones and ranunculus under caterpillar tunnels set up in rows. Constructed of conduit pipe, plastic and baling twine, the unheated tunnels provide the ideal growing conditions for the cool season crops.

“The thing that has fascinated me the most is how many gorgeous, unique, and varied flowers I could grow this first year. It inspires me to try growing so many things here in humid zone 7b.”

Stokes learned how to extend the growing season through succession planting which allows for spacing out plantings so that everything does not bloom at one time. “I also bought narcissus, tulip bulbs and peony roots with early-, mid-, and late-bloom times so they would not all bloom at one time.”

With occasional help and the support of her husband Robert, Stokes has learned to pace herself. “Since I am the only one working the gardens (besides my sweet husband who helps with building caterpillar tunnels, putting out landscape fabric and staking dahlias,) I have learned to create manageable plans and goals, all of which are driven by the direction, focus,



and style of the business I envision.”

Stokes is a member of the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers and has been designated as part of the Floret Collective, a group of select members committed to growing and buying local flowers.

“I learned so much from the flowers that did not make it last year. But I tell myself, what is the worst that can happen? I lose some flowers, but I can plant new ones.”

With a renewed hope, blooms on the horizon, and a place on the local flower scene, Stokes knows her mother would have readily joined her new venture. “She would laugh and think this is so much fun.”

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