

Promote your flowers this summer with American Flowers Week

By Debra Prinzing

American-grown flowers are worth celebrating, so I figured they needed their own holiday. It's called American Flowers Week (AFW). And what better time of year than the Fourth of July, Independence Day, to plan the festivities? For the third consecutive year, American Flowers Week (June 28-July 4) gives flower farmers and their customers a good reason to promote homegrown botanicals.

I come from the world of media, and I know how important having an answer to the "why now?" question can be when persuading writers and editors that a story is timely or relevant. If the news generated by last year's AFW campaign is any indication, there is indeed media interest in featuring American-grown flowers in newspapers, magazines and blogs, and even on television. Hey, it's newsworthy!

"We are seeing strong interest in cut flowers from both home gardeners and commercial farmers," says Hillary Alger, Johnny's Selected Seeds' product manager for herbs and flowers. "A significant portion of the growth in this area is coming from young farmers and farmers who may be new to flowers. We care about the success of our farmers and gardeners, so it's exciting to see this area of growth and a potentially new market opportunity for market growers." Last year, Johnny's supported AFW in several of its Instagram posts. This year, the Winslow, Maine-based seed supplier has joined the campaign as a major sponsor. "American Flowers Week and the American-grown message is an important opportunity to recognize and celebrate what's happening, while spreading the word," Alger adds.

Farmers are jumping onboard, using AFW tie-ins for local promotions, such as in South Carolina where last year, a group calling itself SC Upstate Flowers made a big splash by throwing an AFW farmer-florist party. The goal? To introduce themselves and their beautiful, local blooms to

their hometown florists.

Melissa Smith of Fraylick Farm in Travelers Rest, S.C., came up with the idea after reading about AFW 2016 in the Slowflowers.com newsletter.

"I thought, 'we need to do something with this — this is a good opportunity,'" she explains. The idea of a "farmer-florist party" gained momentum when Suzie Bunn of Stalice Floral offered to hold the event in her Greenville, S.C., studio.

The festivities took place on June 27, 2016, the day before American Flowers Week launched. "We had only been around as a group since February and only a handful of florists knew about us," Melissa recalls. "I made an invitation with the American Flowers Week graphics and each SC Upstate Flowers member was designated to email or hand-deliver invitations to three or four local florists." Some of those invites were cold calls, but when the farmer arrived with a sample bouquet in hand, the introduction was easy. The message: Come and make an arrangement for yourself; enjoy a glass of wine on us; and play with beautiful, local, American grown floral products. Member farmers brought an abundance of freshly harvested botanicals to share with florists. "We filled up the room we were in and

spilled into the adjacent floral studio," Melissa says. "About half of the guests jumped in and made arrangements; some just gathered blooms to take home and later we saw their photos on Instagram. Most were just happy to have a chance to sit down and talk with others in the industry." American Flowers Week gave the cadre of growers a reason to connect with and solidify relationships with their customers. "Event florists love what we're doing — they want us to grow more," Melissa says. "There are a ton of retail florists here in the area, which is the niche we're still trying to break into, but we've made some headway and those are the ones we want to reach in the coming year."

The party continues for 2017, she reports. Set for June 19th at Urban Petals in Greer, S.C., a studio owned by florist Anna Stouffer, the event encourages local florists to "spend an evening with their peers and enjoy flower fun without the pressure of arranging for clients," Melissa says. Look for images of the party on Instagram, where the flower farmers use #scupstateflowers as their hashtag.

More flowers and exposure

There are numerous other ways to celebrate American Flowers Week,

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Sarah Pabody of Triple Wren Farm used red ranunculus, white peonies and bachelor buttons to promote her farm through AFW on social media.

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including these creative examples from flower farmers around the U.S.:

Marybeth Wehrung of Stars of the Meadow flower farm in New York's Hudson Valley used American Flowers Week stickers on her mixed bouquets sold through two local natural grocery stores last year. She's already planning her own version of a farmer-florist bash for 2017, partnering with other members of the young Hudson Valley Flower Growers Network.

Based in Nashville, where she operates The Farmer's Florist, Christie Tarleton is a floral designer who sources flowers from the Six Boots Growers' Collective, her husband Will Tarleton's organic vegetable farm, as well as from other local growers, including Basil and Bergamot, Green Door Gourmet Farm and Turnbull Creek Farm.

A follower of the Slow Flowers movement, Christie learned about American Flowers Week and decided to "creatively utilize the concept" for a July 4th weekend pop-up store at a local coffee shop. "Using #americanflowersweek was a way for us to advertise our products all over the place- a catalyst and helpful connector for me to show there is an actual community out there," she explains.

Customers responded positively to an interactive floral frame that doubled as a "selfie" photo booth that Christie set up at the coffee bar. "We wanted a way to get people excited about what we were doing and so we encouraged them to take a picture and use the hashtag when they posted their photos."

By now, most modern-day market farmers know the benefits of sharing farm, flower field and bouquet photos on Instagram, Facebook and other social media. Keeping to the patriotic #americanflowersweek theme can be as simple as posting red-white-and-blue flower pics. According to keyhole.co, an independent tracking service, the #americanflowersweek hashtag generated 1.4 million impressions on Instagram and Twitter in one month alone last summer. While that's only one metric, it's noteworthy and should definitely increase this year.

At Jello Mold Farm in Mt. Vernon, Washington, co-owner Dennis Westphall says the idea for his spoof of the 1999 Kevin Spacey film "American Beauty" came while picking and discarding dozens of 'Cafe au Lait' dahlias that had bud damage. "I dropped what I was doing and filled up a whole wagon with the unsellable flower heads," he recalls. "I thought, 'okay, I'm putting these in the bathtub and crawling in.'" He asked his wife and business partner Diane Szukovathy to snap a photo and that's when she suggested Dennis post the image in honor of American Flowers Week.

"I posted it and within ten minutes, my phone started going ballistic -- people were sharing the image all over the place," he says, with no small amount of glee. "It stayed number one on #cafeaulait hashtags for two or three days. It was my biggest post ever."

Clearly, the image of a semi-naked flower farmer submerged in a bathtub filled with dahlia heads wasn't likely to sell more of Jello Mold's floral crops, but it convinced Dennis that posting images with his wacky, off-kilter worldview was worth the effort. "Everybody already has the pretty flower pictures covered, so I agreed to join Ins-

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portrait to help tell their story to customers and social media followers. The farm also delivered its weekly Mason jar bouquets with American Flowers Week labels to Cone & Steiner, a boutique grocery chain in Seattle that promotes local produce and agriculture.

This year, Triple Wren plans to use AFW labels on 500 mixed bouquets to be sold through Whole Foods, Metropolitan Market and New Seasons stores in the Pacific Northwest.

"We always have the Certified American Grown logo on everything that ships from our farm, be it retail or wholesale product that's sleeved," Sarah says. "But I feel like the impact during AFW is so much more powerful because other farmers are participating as well, so I'm extra motivated."

Debra Prinzing is a Seattle-based author of Slow Flowers and creator of Slowflowers.com.

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Free marketing resources available for AFW

Launched in 2015, American Flowers Week is a celebration of domestic flowers designed to raise consumer awareness and unite America's flower farmers and the U.S. floral industry. The date coincides with Independence Day (June 28-July 4). The goal of AFW is to engage the public, policymakers and the media in a conversation about the origins of their flowers. As an advocacy effort tied in with the Fourth of July, the campaign provides florists, retailers, wholesalers and flower farmers a patriotic opportunity to promote American grown flowers. Anyone who grows, designs, markets, sells or just enjoys flowers can get involved to highlight domestic, local American-grown flowers. Involvement through social media is encouraged with the hashtag #americanflowersweek. AFW is co-produced by the Slow Flowers Podcast and Slowflowers.com, the free, nationwide, online directory to American Flowers and the people who grow and design with them. How to get involved? Visual resources are available for free at AmericanFlowersWeek.com, including logo, badge, social media icons and coloring maps. Downloadable fact sheets, infographics and the 2017 AFW logo and social media badges are available for growers and florists to use for their own marketing and promotion efforts.



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