

Growing a Dream

How city-dweller-turned-flower-farmer Sarah Adams found space to blossom.

On the Canada Day weekend in 2017, Sarah Adams drove from Calgary to a five-and-a-half-acre patch in Vulcan County and stood there looking at the land. The farm was weedy and dilapidated — it had stood abandoned for 30 years — but all Adams could see were flowers.

Today, that farm is her home, her job and her life. Adams is the founder of Alberta Girl Acres, selling fresh-cut specialty flowers that she grows on the land. Like any entrepreneur, she found getting her business off the ground (literally in this case) enormously challenging, but it's working. All summer, she sells stems by appointment from the farm and out of a converted horse trailer at the Vulcan UFA Farm & Ranch Supply Store. She creates everything from handtied bouquets to flower chandeliers for weddings and events, and she runs flower-related workshops and a floral community-supported agriculture (CSA) program. During the months when the ground is frozen, she plans her fields, builds her marketing strategy and updates the self-published book she wrote about small-business flower farming. All the while, she's raising two pre-teen daughters, spending time with partner Nathan Linford (who lives on the farm when he's not working in Calgary) and caring for her dogs, pig and a small flock of chickens.

From the outside looking in, Adams's farm purchase might seem impulsive, but for her it was the culmination of a lifelong yearning. As a child, she lived out in the country near Cold Lake, Alta. and loved everything about rural life. When she was a teenager, her grandmother taught her the basics of gardening, and she loved that, too. But as she grew older, life kept getting in the way of retreating to the country. As a visual artist, stand-up comedian and communications professional, cities were where the work was, leading her to Toronto, Edmonton and Calgary. She got married and divorced and adjusted to life as a single parent. But through it all, Adams never lost her love of growing things. "It didn't matter where I was, I had to have a garden," she says. "It feels like an extension of myself. At a certain point I decided this is what I truly care about, and that maybe I'm the only person who can make my dreams come true."

Realizing the dream has not been easy. Adams says the days since that first weekend on the farm have been full of work, sweat and stress. "I joke that every problem is 20 problems in disguise," she says. At first, the farmhouse didn't even have running water. Adams renovated it herself with the help of her mother, all while putting together a business plan, planning her fields and learning how to make a living as a farmer. On top of everything, she worried her children, born and raised in the city, wouldn't like this new life. Every day, Adams was driven by the knowledge that she had no real safety net; she was just going to have to make it work.

Fortunately, working on the farm was deeply rewarding. After years of feeling anxious and directionless in the city, Adams was building something of her own. "I'd never had my own place," she says. "As a single mom, I hadn't thought it would ever happen."

Hard work aside, the transition to grower life has been surprisingly seamless for Adams. Far from a massive career shift, flower farming has proven to be a natural extension of all the skills she had been developing for years. She uses her creativity and her artistic sense of composition and texture every day. Her marketing and management skills helped her launch her business and keep it steady, and her experience in arts administration, including her most recent pre-farm role as a communications coordinator for a non-profit arts foundation, taught her to spin gold from a shoestring budget. Even the economy of language she honed in comedy is applicable in her communications efforts (and of course, keeping her sense of humour intact has been vital). "All my experience trained me to make something out of nothing," she laughs.

Back when Adams first drew up her business plan and applied for a loan, she was the only small-scale flower farm in Southern Alberta; now she's part of a small but expanding community of growers. In the summer of 2019, Adams launched the Alberta Growers' Flower Market with nine other farmers, securing a small location at Granary Road where they could sell blooms as a cooperative. The location didn't work as well as Adams had hoped and she has since reluctantly closed the market, but as a community consolidation effort, the venture was a huge success. One of the things Adams is particularly proud of is how the regional growers



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were able to come together to set prices that better reflected the realities of small-scale farming, rather than abide by wholesale pricing lists set by the commercial floral industry, where blooms are mass-produced with liberal usage of chemical pesticides and herbicides, and often in parts of the world with minimal labour laws. “This commercial floral industry has dominated floral pricing and our perceived value of flowers for a long time,” Adams says. Though there has been a shift toward consumers seeking out local and sustainable flowers, small-scale growers in places like Southern Alberta with its stunted growing season can’t compete with the commercial industry’s prices. By coming together and setting their own prices, as well as establishing processes for counting inventory and getting their product to market, Adams

and her fellow regional growers were, in essence, advocating for their product as something separate from imported flowers. “As a group we were able to effectively demonstrate what ‘locally grown flowers’ meant in terms of value and quality,” she says.

In the future, Adams hopes to engage in more cooperative efforts. “It’s one of the few industries that works better with collaboration as opposed to competition,” she says. But for now, she is focusing her energy on her own farm, where she’s happiest and continues to be inspired. “Every day is completely new,” she says. As for her early concern that her kids wouldn’t like country life, that proved unfounded. Recently she was helping one of her daughters study vocabulary, and one of the words was “utopic.”

The girl’s eyes lit up. “Oh!” she said. “That’s like our farm!” ☺