

Sweet Smell of Success



*You can buy all sorts of organic veggies
at Little River Flower Farm in Buiston,
but it's the homegrown bouquets that
beguile everyone. By Aurelia C. Scott.*

NANCY Stedman, who owns Little River Flower Farm in Buxton with her husband Bruce, fertilized her first vegetable garden with fish. Not commercial fish fertilizer, you understand, but actual fish. It was the 1970s. Stedman, a native of Bangor, was then a biologist working in Searsport for Central Maine Power Company. Passionate about houseplants, she decided to expand her gardening to the outdoors. She planted her first vegetable garden in a quarter-acre plot beside the office.

As Stedman tells it, "I did the lab analysis on the fish that CMP netted. After we tested them, they weren't really edible, but I couldn't just let them go to waste. So I started digging holes in my garden and dropping them in. For those two years in Searsport, I had the most incredible garden."

Given that beginning, it seems inevitable that Nancy Stedman would one day own an organic flower and vegetable farm. First, though, she spent another five years as a biologist, moving too often to plant a garden. Then she married Portland-based printer Bruce Stedman, and in 1984, they settled down in a Victorian house in Portland's Deering neighborhood.

"Low and behold, it had a double lot!" Stedman claps her hands with remembered delight. "I put in a twenty-foot-by-seventy-foot garden that seemed as big as ten acres to me. I wanted vegetables, but I loved flowers, so I ended up decorating with vegetables."

She lined the driveway with loose lettuce and basil; she grew cucumbers up trellises. She filled planters with edible flowers and cultivated eight varieties of mint. In 1993, she entered and won the "Best Garden" contest sponsored by Skillins Nursery.

"That," she grins, "gave me ideas." By then, she and Bruce had dug up their

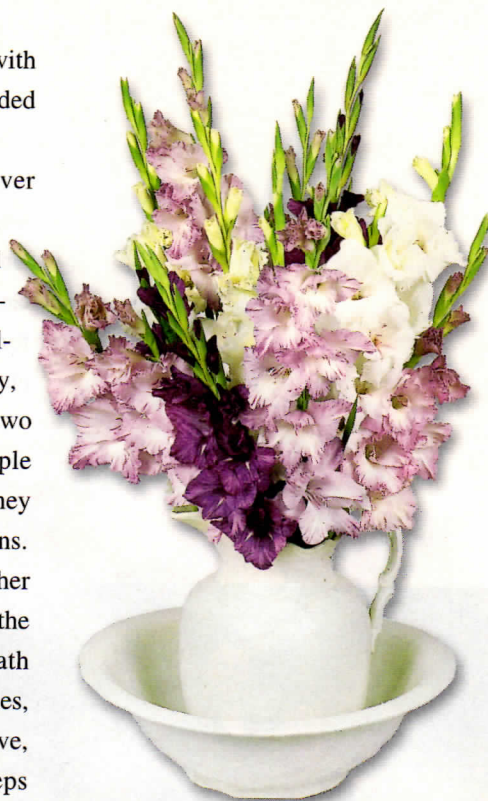
entire backyard and filled the house with flowers and houseplants. They needed more space.

Which brings us to Little River Flower Farm on Turkey Lane in Buxton, just a few miles and a world away from the bustle of Gorham center. A sunflower-decorated sign welcomes visitors up the sloping driveway, past a rainbow field of flowers and two heirloom Summer Transparent apple trees, to a brown, 1815, center-chimney cape farmhouse backed by white barns.

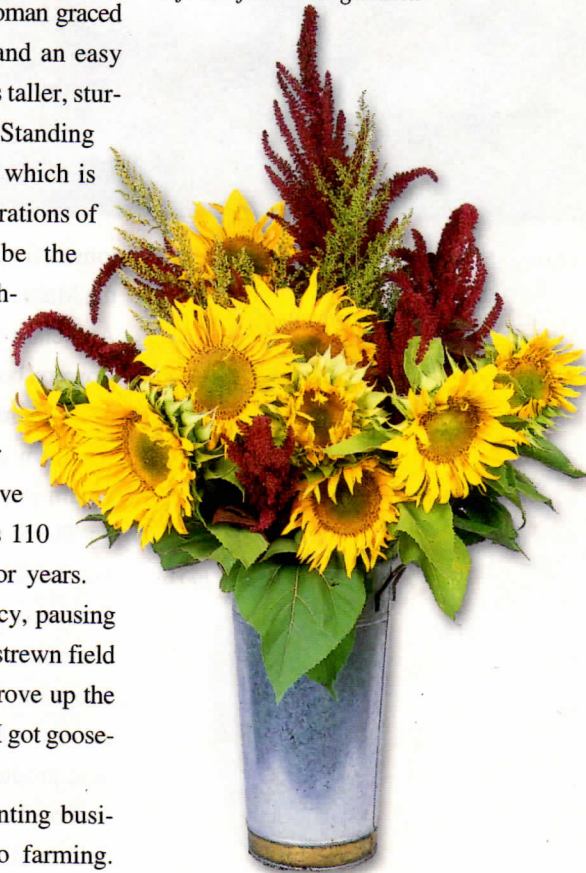
Two gentle black Labradors usher guests to the kitchen garden beside the Stedmans' front door. A brick path curves past tumbling pink roses, poppies, iris, lilies, and herbs — monarda, chive, sage, tarragon, mint. Thyme creeps around flagstones that punctuate the freeform beds. Finches perch, chattering, on hand-crafted gourd feeders. In the distance, a rooster crows.

NANCY Stedman is a small, dark-haired, quicksilver woman graced with a ready smile and an easy laugh. Her husband, Bruce, is taller, sturdier, and just as gregarious. Standing on their granite front stoop, which is worn gently concave by generations of stepping feet, they describe the months that they spent searching the Greater Portland area for "the typical twenty acres plus farmhouse." They were about to give up when their Realtor encouraged them to drive out to Buxton. "He said, 'It's 110 acres. It's been abandoned for years. But just go look.'" says Nancy, pausing to gaze out across the flower-strewn field beside the apple trees. "We drove up the driveway and both Bruce and I got goosebumps," she finishes.

In 1994, they left the printing business and dove headfirst into farming.



The bouquets that Nancy Stedman puts together are the sort that would be hard to come by at a standard florist shop. Whether incorporating maroon zinnias (opposite), purple and white gladioluses (above), or bright sunflowers and amaranthus, everything is fresh from her garden.



Despite the inevitable early frosts, late frosts, wet planting seasons, summer droughts, and cranky machinery, both Stedmans abound with palpable joy. They are not trained in agriculture — Nancy's Cooperative Extension Master Gardener training is the extent of their formal horticultural education — yet clearly, farming is their passion.

"We dig in the dirt for a living and we're really happy doing it," says Nancy.

During its June-through-October season, Little River Flower Farm offers cus-

nesses on Wednesday. On a typical August week, the Veggie-Lovers email list includes blueberries, corn, cucumbers, tomatoes, leeks, peas, mesclun greens, beets, eggplants, beans, free-range eggs, and a seasoning of such herbs as basil, mint, parsley, and thyme.

"People love the fact that there's no pressure," says Bruce Stedman. "They're on their computers anyway, so it's easy. Everything is fresh, and it's all organic."

In 1996, the Stedmans planted three gooseneck gourd seeds, which they had been given by a Pennsylvania Amish farmer. The resulting vines took over the garden, says Nancy. "But the shapes of the gourds were so amazing that we fell in love with them."

Adds Bruce, "Gourds are one of the oldest fruits in the world. And they are the only fruit that is native to every continent on the earth."

Today, they devote two acres to gourds. After washing them in a seven-foot-long antique milk cooler and drying them in the barn, the Stedmans craft painted and die-cut bird feeders, birdhouses, vases, and ornaments. In 1999, they sold the gourds at five Maine craft shows. Demand for their creations has been so strong that, in 2002, they attended twenty-six shows, including the Portland and Philadelphia flower shows.

THE REAL cornerstone of Little River Flower Farm's business, however, is Nancy Stedman's "beautiful and bountiful bouquets." She began making them more than fifteen years ago as a way to thank printing-business clients. Soon, those clients' colleagues were asking to buy bouquets. "My flower bouquet business just blossomed from there," says Stedman.

The work begins in March when Nancy starts the flowers in cold frames behind the barn. In early May, the



Since 1994, Nancy and Bruce Stedman have been making a living producing all sorts of organic vegetables, free-range eggs, gooseneck gourds — and flowers — at their Buxton farmstead.

Some of their customers have a standing order for a fresh bouquet every week, and Nancy has made a reputation for her flower arrangements by weaving dramatic colors into them, often along with aromatic herbs.

tomers fresh organic produce certified by the Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association, plus free-range eggs, sunflowers, bouquets, and hard-shell gooseneck gourds. Everything is available at the farm and at the weekly Saco and Unum-Provident farmers' markets.

The Stedmans' three acres of organic vegetables and fruit are also offered to Scarborough and Greater Portland area customers via a Veggie-Lovers Online Program. Every Monday, customers receive a farm email that lists the available produce, fruits, and flowers. Email orders placed by Tuesday are picked and delivered to customers' homes or busi-

Stedmans set out 800 flower seedlings, including zinnias, asters, baby's breath, and statice, under protective row cover. By June, they finish planting the four-plus acres beside the house — 3,200 plants in total, comprising 40 varieties of annuals and 100 types of perennials.

Stedman now makes more than 200 bouquets each week during the season. Many of those are for clients who contract with Stedman to receive a fresh bouquet every Monday in their office. Stedman has been creating such bouquets for Kathy LaBelle, a business analyst at Unum-Provident, for more than five years.

"It's so wonderful to come into work and have something special to look forward to every Monday. I love looking at the bouquet all week, particularly when I'm having a moment that's not perfect . . ." she laughs. "I concentrate on the bouquet. It pulls me away from the reality of work for a few moments." LaBelle adds that she has planted seeds from the bouquets into her own garden. "I have learned a lot from Nancy. My own garden has become a reflection of the bouquets I've been receiving all these years."

In addition to designing bouquets for regular clients and offering them at farmers' markets, Stedman makes bouquets-while-you-wait for visitors who drive out to the farm. As she says, "Talk about fresh! They can tell me what they want in it. While I'm making it, they can sit in the garden, smell the herbs. They can even go visit with the chickens . . ." She points to a large brown shed around which Rhode Island and New Hampshire Reds, Speckled Sussex, Polish, Australorpe, Barred Plymouth Rock, and Houdon chickens peck.

On request, Stedman also offers bouquets that she describes as an interpretation of aromatherapy. "A good candidate for an aromatherapy bouquet would be someone who works too many hours and

doesn't get outside often or take breaks," she explains. "Anyone who is looking for an uplift other than a chocolate bar."

Aromatherapy bouquets combine visual stimulation, herbal and floral scents, and flowers and herbs that can be used for cooking. While Stedman has studied the different medicinal and culinary uses of herbs, she doesn't describe her aromatherapy bouquets as medicinal. "That wouldn't be appropriate." Instead, she says, she combines the most energizing or calming herbs (depending on the client's needs), such as apple mint, calendula, dianthus, thyme, and lovage, with annual flowers.

"I work with people to help them get the most out of these bouquets," she says, "I tell them how to use each herb. During the day, if they need a pick-me-up, lean in and inhale. It's almost like taking a walk outside."

Nancy Stedman herself experienced the healing power of flowers when she fought breast cancer in 2001. "When I was going through chemotherapy, I realized the power of happiness in healing. If I can bring someone a bouquet that makes them happy and brings a smile to their face, I think it offers a natural kind of healing."

Standing in the lee of her barn and gazing out at her burgeoning field of flowers, Nancy smiles and says, "It all seems like a miracle to me." □

Little River Flower Farm, 160 Turkey Lane, Buxton, Maine 04093. 207-929-3967. www.littleriverflowerfarm.com. From Portland, take Route 25 to Gorham; go through downtown; turn left on Flagg Meadow Road. After about two miles, turn right on Turkey Lane. Little River Flower Farm is about a mile on the left-hand side.

