

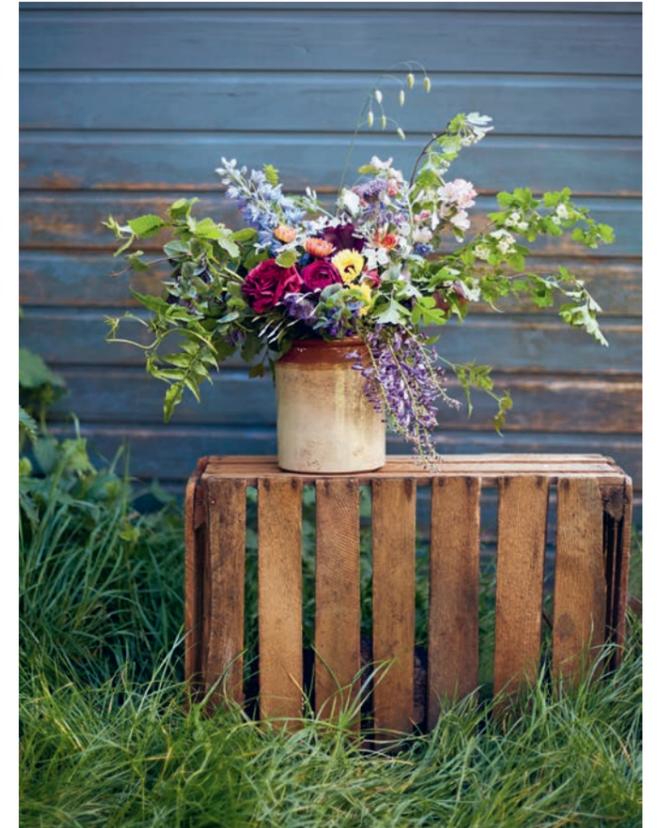


# The first ladies of British blooms

Camila Klich and Marianne Mogendorff have built a successful business growing seasonal and sustainable cut flowers. They tell Ciar Byrne about their new book and how they were inspired by the first celebrity florist



Clockwise from opposite page: Camila Klich (left) and Marianne Mogendorff in their glasshouse; a dahlia grown at Wolves Lane and one of their gorgeous arrangements



In 1954 the florist Constance Spry wrote a tiny but influential manual titled *How to Do the Flowers*, in which she argued that flower arranging works best when it makes use of seasonal blooms. Almost 70 years on, her legacy is being continued in a new book by urban ‘florist farmers’ Camila Klich and Marianne Mogendorff.

The friends founded the Wolves Lane Flower Company in 2017 in one-and-a-half glasshouses on a former council site in north London, taking annual flowers on their entire journey from seed to market. With a nod to Spry, their new book is titled *How to Grow the Flowers*, and it aims to show both newbies and those with some experience how easy it is to produce cut flowers for the home.

Klich and Mogendorff were both working as producers – in the fashion industry and theatre and dance respectively – when, in their early 30s, they felt ready for a change.

One day Marianne, who had recently moved house, walked past the Wolves Lane site – a glasshouse complex including a palm house and a cactus house formerly used by Haringey Council to grow bedding

plants for its parks and for educational purposes – and was intrigued.

The seed of growing flowers to sell was planted in both their minds at Mogendorff’s wedding, when her friends and family helped to arrange flowers provided by Bristol-based Organic Blooms. When the pair discovered there was an open invitation to tender for the Wolves Lane site they put together a business plan, even though Klich was working in San Francisco at the time.

They didn’t win the tender but they did get to know the people who eventually took over the site, and negotiated the use of one of the large glasshouses plus half of a smaller one for sowing from seed. The Wolves Lane Flower Company was born.

## Growing success

The concept of ‘florist farmer’ has gained popularity in recent years. It started in the US and has now been embraced in the UK by the movement *Flowers from the Farm*. But it is more unusual to grow flowers in the middle of the city, as Klich and Mogendorff do.

For the first year after taking on the site they continued in their day

jobs, working long weekends in the Wolves Lane glasshouses.

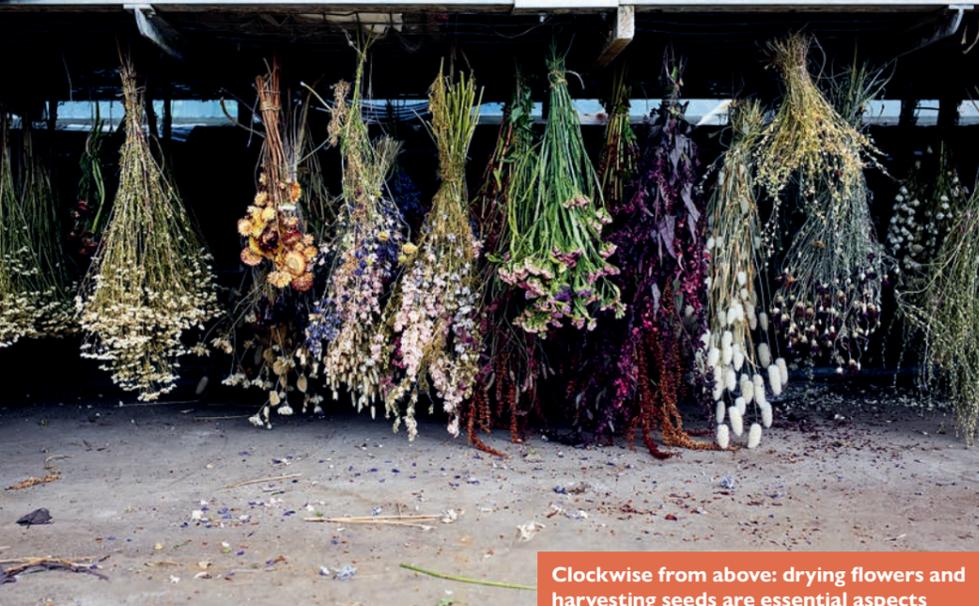
‘All there was in the glasshouse was some weed-suppressant matting and metal staging. It was this boiling hot, barren landscape that we had to try and bring back to life. At that point, pre-kids, we had lots of naïve optimism,’ says Mogendorff.

Five years on they have three children under four between them and a thriving business selling hard-to-come-by seasonal flowers to the London market.

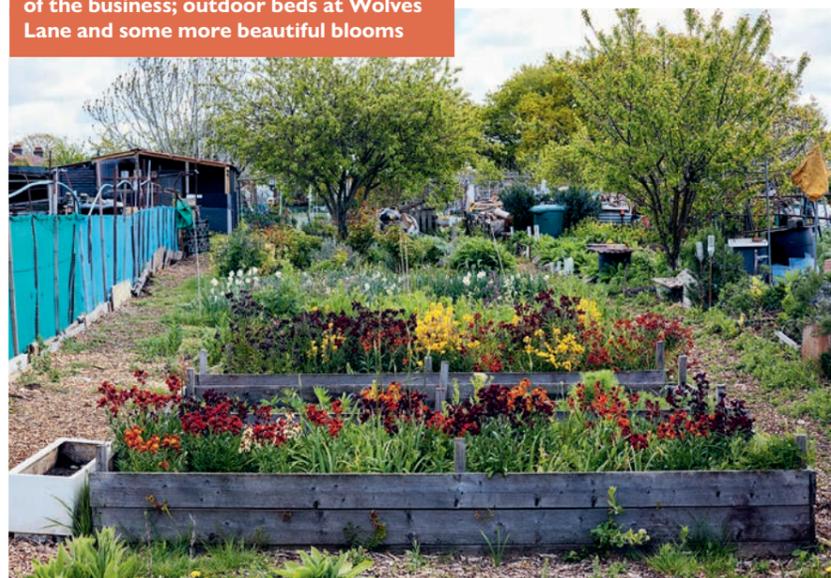
They want to dispel the myth that there is a right way to do things, and show in their book how anyone can grow cut flowers with just a window box or a small patio. ‘Horticulture can feel like a bit an insiders’ club,’ says Mogendorff. ‘We want to say there is no one way to grow flowers – you have to find what works for you. Our book is an insight into what works for us. Because we’re not formally trained it felt important to try and inspire others just to give it a go. Most of my friends look mystified when I say “mulch”.’

‘Over-wintering’ just blows their minds too,’ adds Klich.

Over-wintering is essential in commercial flower growing, and it ➤



Clockwise from above: drying flowers and harvesting seeds are essential aspects of the business; outdoor beds at Wolves Lane and some more beautiful blooms



A Wolves Lane bouquet. Left: Camila and Marianne selecting and harvesting their chrysanthemums

can be revelatory for amateurs to learn that autumn, not spring, is the best time to sow many flower seeds. How to Grow the Flowers begins with a section on what to do from September to November.

‘For flower growers the season starts in autumn,’ says Klich. ‘It’s a difficult thing to get your head around because you’re still harvesting the current season’s crop. There’s an overlap with the beginning of the new season where you sow seeds to over-winter, plant bulbs and dig up dahlias. You get a much earlier crop, and you get flowers for longer throughout the year if you start in autumn.’

Larkspur, cornflowers, cerinthe, *Ammi majus* and calendula are all good flowers to sow in early autumn and are great for beginners because they have big seeds, which are easier to handle. Sweet peas are also best sown in November.

Klich and Mogendorff grow their seedlings in the glasshouse throughout

the colder months, ensuring blooms the following spring. Some flowers, such as California poppies, have to be moved outside, as the lush conditions in the glasshouse mean their stems become too fleshy to cut.

### Patience pays

They believe flower growing can be a great antidote to the constant quest for gratification that has taken over modern life. ‘So much about growing flowers is common sense, but it uses skills we’ve lost because of our need for immediate gratification and the dopamine hit that consumption gives you. Growing is about observing, it’s about patience, it’s about the anticipation of joy. If you can embrace those things then anyone can grow,’ says Klich.

Thriftiness is also important to the pair, who are keen to promote growing from seed as an economical alternative to buying plants from garden centres. Early autumn is the

best time to collect seed and their method – which they borrowed from Spry – is to tie a piece of red twine around particularly good plant specimens and then leave those to go to seed.

‘It might sound obvious, but if you cut all the flowers off then you don’t have any seed,’ says Mogendorff. ‘Choose what you’re going to enjoy now in a vase and what you’re going to save for a subsequent year. We often find that saved seed grows much better for us as it’s adapted to the environment in which we’re growing. With things like a calendula or *Ammi*, it’s super-easy to save the seed and grow again.’

September or late summer is also the best time to pick flowers for drying. They should be cut while they are still in their prime and then stored in a dry, dark place for the winter months. Blooms that might seem a little garish when cut fresh, such as bright China asters, work well when dried. Sorrel is

another plant that looks good if you let it flower and then dry it, with a beautiful rusty texture, while the seed pods of nigella (love-in-a-mist) work best if cut while still green.

‘It’s so exciting to see how dried flowers are enjoying their moment again and throwing off that 1970s image,’ says Mogendorff. ‘It’s all about responding to the botanical beauty and dried skeletal seedheads. Drying flowers is simple, but you have to think about doing it sooner than you would imagine. It’s no good thinking about drying flowers in November because everything is damp and wet. What’s key is no moisture and a dark environment, because that is what keeps the colours. If it was down to me I would love to just run off to the country and dry flowers all day long.’

### Local heroines

Sustainability is at the heart of the enterprise – they growing organically without using chemicals, avoid peat-based compost and only use reusable plastics if necessary. ‘More and more people are demanding to

*‘I would love to just run off to the country and dry flowers all day long’*

know more about where their flowers come from and how they’re treated,’ says Mogendorff. ‘Locally grown using an organic approach is something we will see consumers asking for more over the next decade.’

They have become obsessed with making their own compost, which they keep in bays around the site and use to enrich the soil. During their first couple of years they suffered from an aphid infestation, but as they continued to use organic growing methods ladybirds returned to the site and ate the pests.

Selling flowers grown locally is beneficial to the environment. ‘We’re dealing with perishable plants, which will die on your kitchen table within

a couple of weeks, so to be damaging the planet to have whatever flower you want at any point in the year to us just doesn’t make sense,’ says Klich. ‘We live in a country where between March and November you can have seasonal British flowers that are absolutely beautiful.’

Although local seasonal growing is enjoying a renaissance, it is nothing new, and would have been a very familiar concept to their muse.

‘Constance was saying these things decades ago,’ adds Klich. ‘She always advised people to look in hedgerows and at what was in season and looking beautiful in your garden.’

‘At the beginning of her career she didn’t have things like floral foam at her disposal, so she was always working in a sustainable way.

The idea of not using seasonal and sustainable flowers for floristry would probably never have occurred to her.’ ■



PICTURES: WOLVES LANE FLOWER COMPANY