

Forward-thinking floriculture flowers in the Far North

By Noel Garcia

As Aotearoa's floriculture industry faces the need to evolve, one Far North grower and florist stands out as an early bloomer.

Waipapakauri-based Kat Rodger is forging a forward-thinking path in a space often dominated by plastic, chemicals, importation and waste issues stemming from single-use materials.

Rodger grew up on one of the Far North's first avocado orchards in Kaingaroa with parents who instilled in her a deep-rooted love for nature.

"I spent a lot of my childhood outside with my hands in the dirt, exploring and observing my surroundings. My Mum grew our own food and we had a small farm of chickens, goats, cows and pigs," Rodger said.

"Mum was always doing quirky little things like washing and reusing every plastic bag, which we do religiously now. I think all this exposure to nature and to thinking about the environment led me on this path."

Rodger began growing flowers commercially in 2020 and today operates Duncan Rd Creative, a business offering seasonal fresh flowers grown using sustainable and regenerative practices.

Rodger said the beauty of the floristry industry did a good job of covering up its globally-felt negative environmental impacts, and many florists were ignoring waste issues.

"Behind the flowers are some disturbing practices."

Rodger pointed to flowers' often far-flung origins, single-use materials commonly used in installations and dyes and paints applied to enhance flowers as "overlooked" issues.

"Maybe it's because everything looks so beautiful that many people forget to consider these aspects."

Wellington-area business coach and flower farmer Julie Treanor said she was familiar with movements towards more locally grown flowers in Australia, America and the UK.

"It's partly coming out of the realisation that the global scale is not sustainable. Philosophically, you have to consider the impact of importing flowers."

Treanor said increasing numbers of small growers across Aotearoa could be seen operating in the same vein as Rodger, while some bigger operations had closed.

"Anecdotally, what I understand is that floriculture in NZ is a maturing industry. People with large-scale operations have reached retirement age and younger people aren't taking it on. There are increasing numbers of tiny and small-scale growers who are growing seasonally for local customers. And it's part of a global trend towards 'cottage industries', which see women running businesses from home."

According to Stats NZ, as of June 2022, Northland was home to the country's fifth-highest number of floriculture farms with a count of 18.

The majority were in Canterbury and Auckland - both home to 51 farms - and Bay of Plenty with 33.

In June 2018, there were nearly twice as many in Northland at 33, and higher numbers in Canterbury (72), Auckland (75) and Bay of Plenty (39) as well.

Treanor said Covid had hit the cut flower industry hard, and may have driven people to retire sooner than they otherwise would have.

During times of restricted business activity, the industry sought an exemption for cut flower growers to be able to sell through existing local outlets like supermarkets but was denied.

“Restrictions of movement of goods even meant flowers couldn't legally be given away. So, growers were forced to destroy their crops.”

As support for local flower options continued to grow, Treanor said those seeking to buy local could find growers on nzflowercollective.co.nz/growers, where at last count there were 120 small growers like Rodger featured.

Treanor said that number was growing ferociously, as were collectives through which small-scale growers could come together to create better buying opportunities for wholesale.

She said by comparison with other countries - which import heavily - New Zealand did “pretty well for a balance of domestically produced and imported flowers”.

Treanor agreed with Rodger's belief that sustainable and regenerative growing were “definitely on the rise”, with the Far North “slowly budding” behind the rest of NZ.

Rodger explained what's contained in the often green-coloured floral foam - commonly known as “Oasis” - used to hold and preserve arrangements.

“Floral foam is a single-use plastic. It contains petroleum-derived compounds and formaldehyde. It breaks down into microplastics.”

“I know the damage it's causing throughout the world and I know if you make a conscious effort you can create the same beautiful arrangements and installations without it.”

Instead, Rodger chooses reusable materials like water tubes, wire, bungee cords and chicken wire.

“It takes a bit more time at first, but once you have the resources and set up it can be a very efficient process.”

Rodger said bleached, dyed and painted flowers and foliage were currently a “big trend” in floristry.

“I think flowers in their natural state are special enough. There’s no need to coat them in chemicals.”

As for “natural” flowers, Rodger said the question of how and where they were grown often remained unasked.

“I grow all my flowers or forage responsibly. Sometimes I order from local growers in Ahipara and Pukenui if I don’t have enough.”

Self-taught Rodger explained the learning journey spurred by her choices.

“The more I research and practice regenerative growing and sustainable floristry, the more I realise and understand the huge benefits.”

“Regenerative growing” means her top priority is soil health, which she ensures through a range of practices including no-till to minimise soil disruption and use of natural inputs like compost, bokashi juice and homemade fertilisers.

Her labours culminate in a unique offering of fresh seasonal flower subscriptions for homes and businesses, one-off bouquets, wedding and event florals and dried arrangements.

“I think it’s quite a novelty for people to have their wedding flowers grown, harvested and created locally - and by one family.”

A perennial pastime

Floral art is a valued hobby throughout Northland, with nearly 100 members belonging to four “vibrant” clubs in Doubtless Bay, Kaitiāia, Kerikeri and Whangārei under the Floral Art Society of NZ.

Regional president Margaret Aydon described challenges sourcing flowers and said members followed detailed instructions in a handbook to create each design, which determined whether floral foam or an eco-friendly option was used.

“Flowers in the Far North are very expensive and we have very limited options.”

“In the past, chicken wire, vases and other holding materials were used - and in some respects we’re just going back to basics.”

“Floral designers are increasingly opting for native flora, organic elements, and recycled materials, reflecting a conscious effort to reduce the ecological footprint of their creations.”

National president Shirley Russ said sustainability in floral work was a strong theme and moving towards being the norm, with natural sources being used for water retention in place of foam.

Russ said a wider diversity of plant material was also being used, and there was a growing appreciation for seasonal flowers varying by location.

“And there’s more emphasis on appreciating stems with curves as nature grows, rather than the straight commercial flower stem.”

“While the shared love for floral art binds members together, clubs must evolve to cater to modern preferences and sustainability concerns.”

She welcomed anyone with an interest in flowers, regardless of experience, to connect with their nearest club and join a meeting: fasnz.org.nz/join

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