

THE FLORIST FARMER

—BY JON GEORGE—

A movement is afoot in greater Gainesville for locally sourced, fresh ingredients - a longing for the simple joys of farm life in contrast with our hectic, fast-paced lifestyle.

That passion has spilled over into the floral trade with consumers increasingly aware that chemically-laden bouquets may not be what we want on the dining room table. What authors like Michael Pollan did nationally for the organic, slow-food movement, Amy Stewart author of *Flower Confidential* and popular blogger, Erin Benzakein have done for the local flower movement. Benzakein's blog (www.floretflowers.com), detailing life on a flower farm, has catapulted organic, locally grown flowers onto the national scene.

LOCAL FARMERS AND GARDENERS EMBRACE THE MOVEMENT

I caught up recently with local flower farmer Mariana Santana at the Haile Plantation Farmer's Market. Mariana (photo at right) was brimming with excitement as she talked about her fields of flowers at Swallowtail Farm, just north of Alachua. She described waking up before sunrise to pick blooms before the dew dries on a typical market day. The freshness and seasonally based bouquets set her and other local flower farmers apart from the traditional floral industry where blooms may have been stored for up to two weeks before they reach your shopping cart.

Flower names like "Love in A Mist" and "Sweet William" evoke a nostalgic bouquet picked from Grandma's garden, and Mariana mentioned that it was not too late for home gardeners to plant sunflowers, zinnias and celosia in their own gardens.

We left the conversation with an exchange of planting ideas as well as a few dahlia tubers from our own farm at Cottage Gardens.



Down home on the farm: my daughter Juliette bonding with daddy's locally grown Dahlias.

GROWING DAHLIAS

Dahlias
(*Dahlia pinnata*) are natives of central Mexico in the region of Mexico City.

February is the perfect time to plant Dahlias, and May brings peak bloom season.

Because of their origin, dahlias require well-drained soils, fairly sunny locations, and, of course, proper fertilization and protection from pests.

Tips:

- 1) Choose heat tolerant varieties
- 2) Foliar feed with compost tea
- 3) Mulch heavily and water deeply

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not your typical landscape



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