

# Ag

## The Ladies of Stem Three plucky flower farmers in Weyers Cave push their pistil biz to new heights.

**Y**ou've heard the old line, "If you build it, they will come." (For those of you too young to remember, it's from the 1989 Kevin Costner movie, *Field of Dreams*, in which an Iowa farmer thinks that if he bulldozes a cornfield into a baseball diamond, people will flock to it.)

That general concept—the idea that if you provide the space, fans will naturally follow—is what initially spurred Jessica Hall and her mom Chris Auville to convert a seven-acre family sheep farm in Augusta County into a mecca for flower lovers. Jessica studied horticulture at Virginia Tech, while her mother has a master's degree in business administration from James Madison University and ran a specialty medical practice for 30 years.

Despite such backgrounds, the Augusta County pair learned that Hollywood endings are not Shenandoah Valley beginnings. "I probably watched *Field of Dreams* too many times," says Jessica.

The original intent of Harmony Harvest Farm was to sell flowers to consumers from the farm, providing bulk flower pickups for florists and do-it-yourself brides. Setting up at farmer's markets was in the plans, too.

"Designer in Chief" Jessica and "Chief Flower Officer" Chris didn't just have green thumbs, they had glittering emeralds for hands, and were wildly successful at growing flowers.

Unfortunately, for what they built, people did not come.

Floral farming is niche agriculture, says Jessica. "It's the most romanticized type of farming you'll see."

"Especially on social media," says younger sister and third member of the Harmony Harvest team, Stephanie Auville, resident "flower advocate" who brings 15 years

of event management and marketing to the table. "Flower farming looks like a bunch of hippies running around in the flower fields. Everything and everyone is pretty all the time, except when they get editorial photos of dirt on brand new muck boots. We fell for the love story."

The farm required a large capital investment and pretty high overhead.



hand, were always eager to source flowers from the verdant Shenandoah Valley but didn't have time to drive to the farm to pick them up.

So mom and daughters focused on getting their blooms into the hands of the people who needed them most: those in the floral trade. They came up with a really slick and easy to navigate website so flower lovers anywhere could peruse their offerings.

Harmony Harvest is now a blooming success just outside the Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport in Weyers Cave. In an interview at their farm, sisters Jessica and Stephanie shared six steps the company took along the way to reach a level of achievement any business owner can learn from.

### 1) Follow the money

As online sales to florists began to take off, the three women realized they weren't just in the flower business, they were in the flower *shipping business*. The more flowers they shipped, the more they wondered, *who needs a wholesaler? Let's just ship the flowers straight to florists ourselves.*

"Shipping flowers for farmers has been a bit taboo," says Stephanie. "Farmers are supposed to grow the flowers and ship to the wholesalers. We just kind of said, 'If they can do it, we can do it.' And we did."

But she points out they have no intention of replacing wholesalers. "We don't grow everything that a florist needs, like roses," she says. "The thing is, florists want very badly to buy from local farms, and wholesalers are making efforts to provide American grown options, but it's a slow process. Our program gives florists better access to American grown flowers to supplement what they get from wholesalers."

Their willingness to veer from farming's traditional path allowed the business to move to a more profitable direction.

The sales they were generating weren't enough to cover all of the expenses.

The disparity made the team realize they had to figure out what their core business actually was and devote their time and energy there. They needed a way to sell more product and widen their footprint.

The empty parking lot at the farm was a clue consumers weren't traveling in droves to their farm for fresh stems. Regional florists, on the other

"Get past thinking about all the things that might not work," says Stephanie. "If you're worried about what might happen, you'll never do anything."

### 2) They meet then repeat

Through its website, Harmony Harvest is now one of the few independent, fresh-cut flower farms of its size to ship product nationally.

An important part of their success is that the ladies meet every Monday to talk finances and check-in on company goals.

"If I miss one week," says Jessica, "I have cold sweats."

That's not an exaggeration. Jessica treats Harmony Harvest as what it is: A family-run business she's long dreamed of leading. The vision is blurred without definitive milestones set and reached.

"You have to have structure," says Jessica. "It doesn't matter how big your business is, if you don't have that, then you're kind of wandering around in the dark."

### 3) They focus on details that make them stand apart

When shipping bouquets, Harmony Harvest includes a hydration pack that can be returned, sterilized and re-used, as opposed to having florists throw away the material. It turns out the flower crowd really liked that offering, much more than the ladies anticipated. Conventional hydration packs were considered too wasteful by their green thumb customers, people generally concerned with sustainability and the environment.

"It all adds up to the experience," Stephanie says. "We want a positive experience. If there's something negative about it, we ask, How can we remove that? We always have our eyes open."

### 4) They're social (online)

Although social media can feel like a big waste of time, the ladies grasped its importance for growing their business. It doesn't hurt that the sisters' big, exuberant personalities make them a natural fit for "the socials."

Every Friday on Instagram and Facebook, the sisters host a "Live from the Cooler" segment in which they riff, juggle, joke and laugh about all that is going on at the farm.

"We're kind of silly. I think people appreciate that," Jessica says. "We keep it light, but informative." Their 4,000 plus followers (at last count) indicates they're landing with an audience.



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### 5) They're active (politically)

While displaying personality is important, it's equally necessary that business owners are advocates for their industry, the sisters say. Last June, they visited Capitol Hill to lobby for the passage of the American Grown Act, which would require the purchase of American Grown-certified cut flowers and foliage for federal facilities and events.

"Farmers need to reach out to their representatives and let them know what they need," Auville says. "Let them know you exist."

### 6) They're always selling

Harmony Harvest has gained traction with its target audience through industry publications and podcasts. Two of their favorite podcasts are *Slow Flowers*, hosted by Debra Prinzing of Seattle, and *Botanical Brouhaha*, led by Amy McGee in Texas.

Yet Harmony Harvest hasn't abandoned its local customer base. It hosts a Christmas market and summer farm event, in addition to the year-round online flower sales and wedding bouquets.

"We come up with new stuff all the time," Stephanie says. It turns out that she and her sister have built something, and people are, in fact, coming. "If you work hard," she says, "you have a shot at the stars aligning." **SA**