

Fern & Flora: A Campus Flower Shop Blooms Through Sustainability Amid Tariffs

By Layli Nazarova | May 12, 2025



The window of Fern & Flora in Champaign, Ill., features a rose mural by artist Leslie Kimble, celebrating the start of the spring and attracting customers with a vibrant display.

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — On a regular Monday afternoon, light pours through a wide window painted with a floral mural and a catchy name: Fern & Flora. The flower shop at the corner of East John and South Sixth streets beckons with its bright interior, where golden light reflects off rose petals and potted leaves. The scent of eucalyptus, fresh soil, and the sweet musk of roses mingle with the faint aroma of candle wax.

Behind the counter, co-owner Jessica Eisenmann tucks a willow branch into a custom student arrangement for the upcoming Easter weekend.

Fern & Flora is the only flower shop located on the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign campus. More than half of their sales come from student walk-ins, Eisenmann said.

"We are very student focused, so we definitely cater to them [students] and what their needs are," she said. "Even the floral designs, maybe what I thought I would have designed, are a little bit different in both color and price range for students."



Customers line up at Fern & Flora in Champaign, Ill., on Sunday, May 11, 2025, to pick up floral arrangements after the store opened for Mother's Day. Most of the shop's customers are students.

Eisenmann never expected to be a florist. She built her career as a travel nurse, but while working in Alaska, she discovered flower farming and later brought it to Illinois.

She started Iron Meadows Farm, located 40 minutes north of Champaign. In summer 2024, she partnered with Kristyn McReaken, the owner of local plant store Planted, to open a new women-owned flower shop.

They took over the location of April's Florist, which had operated for more than 40 years with a loyal customer base that Eisenmann and McReaken would soon inherit.

"We have not had to do any advertising — they [customers] just know it's here," Eisenmann said.

"That's the part of buying an existing business that makes it worth it – you have a built-in customer base."

Now operating as Fern & Flora, the shop offers florals, potted plants, gifts and simple luxuries tailored to students. Stickers, candles, coloring books, organic cosmetics and chocolates are available in-store and online.

Fern & Flora is [one of the 33.2 million small businesses](#) that make up 99.9% of U.S. firms. Small businesses generate [nearly 44% of U.S. gross domestic product](#).

Though small in size, Fern & Flora employs eight people, including several student workers. However, both Eisenmann and McReaken remain hands-on in daily operations.

Tariffs in Bloom

Unlike many florists who rely solely on wholesalers, Fern & Flora has a unique supply chain involving Eisenmann's farm. It supplies up to 50% of the shop's inventory from late spring through fall.

In the summer, Eisenmann grows more than 100 flower varieties, often in limited seasonal runs. Such a supply chain lowers costs, reduces waste and protects the shop from global trade fluctuations.

The floral industry is both uniquely global and vulnerable. In 2022, the United States imported [\\$3.3 billion worth of cut flowers](#), plants and nursery stock from 81 countries, with \$1.2 billion of those imports coming from Colombia, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This heavy reliance on imports brings risk. Uncertainty around tariffs, particularly targeting Colombia, now affects the flower industry more than ever.

Consumers may ultimately feel the impact, said Gustavo Enrique Nino Chaparro, a University of Illinois doctoral candidate studying agricultural economics and the flower supply chain.

"There is a high concentration actually, where 92% of the imports is coming from Latin America," Chaparro said. "This is important because...everything that happened with tariffs or any disruption that you have in the supply chain...is going to affect the prices [for consumers]."

This year, that threat became more real than ever. A 10% baseline tariff on almost all imports took effect April 5, including flowers from key suppliers such as Colombia and Ecuador.

Eisenmann said the uncertainty ahead of Valentine's Day was especially stressful.

"When the threat of Colombian tariffs hit, it was like two weeks before Valentine's Day," she said. "That was going to be major."

At Abbott's Florist, a local competitor, owner Lisa Duitsman said the Canadian tariffs have already affected this year's Easter sales.

"This time of the year, we import from Canada things like tulip plants and daffodils...those did go up quite a bit," Duitsman said. "I had already sold some products to local churches at the lower

price point that I was expecting to pay, and...I can't go back to my customer after that order has been placed and expect them to pay a higher fee."

Fern & Flora, by contrast, did not experience the same issues. In spring, most of their supply comes from Eisenmann's farm.

"We have not noticed any price changes from the tariffs yet," Eisenmann said.

The trend, however, favors their business model.

The U.S. floral industry is growing. In the last five to six years, demand for cut flowers has doubled, according to Chaparro.

"It's expected to continue increasing," he said. "The main reason is because the prices of the cut flowers have been stable, but the salaries [in the U.S.] have increased – that means, in relative terms, the cut flowers are cheaper."

Floral spending in the U.S. [reached \\$71 billion in 2024](#), with per capita spending at \$260, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Buds and Thorns

Despite their local supply advantages, the business faces seasonal challenges. Sales dip during campus breaks, particularly in winter, and since the store has only been open for less than a year, the owners are still learning how to navigate those patterns.

"We still don't know what a full year looks like," Eisenmann said. "We are going to be adjusting our hours [in the summer]."

Another big challenge was the lack of knowledge about their target audience and campus life from the previous owners.

"Had we known certain sororities have certain color flowers for certain weeks, we would just have preordered them versus me scrambling to call and get those flowers," Eisenmann said. "The previous owner probably already knew that, she didn't even think to mention it to us."

Despite the challenges, the owners are working hard to stand out in a market of [more than 11,000 florist shops](#) nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Rooted in Values: What Sets Them Apart

Unlike competitors, Fern & Flora emphasizes sustainability. The owners avoid microplastic floral foam, use recycled kraft paper, and reuse rubber bands.

Their supply chain with emphasis on local sourcing also reduces environmental impact.

"If they're coming from Columbia on a mega jet into Miami, and then they're being flown to Chicago, and then they're being put on another vehicle to come down to Champaign – there's a huge carbon footprint on that," Eisenmann said. "Versus, I live 45 minutes away, I drive down, I drop them [flowers] off when I'm already coming here to work."

Their design aesthetic is another distinguishing factor.

"It's organic and gardeny, not like the traditional '90s floristry," Eisenmann said. "And people notice."



Fern & Flora Florist Laura McNaught (left) and Co-Owner of the store Kristyn McReaken (right) prepare Mother's Day bouquets for customers in Champaign, Ill., on Sunday, May 11, 2025.

Though Fern & Flora has only been open for less than nine months, Eisenmann and McReaken are already thinking long-term.

They hope to empower their employees and provide them with more of a laissez-faire leadership to grow and develop the brand together.

"We have an excellent staff, we would like to see more ownership in them, so they can manage themselves better, and that I and Kristyn can step away a little bit," Eisenmann said. "We can focus on our other businesses but still be here for Fern and Flora."