



Melanie Wenger in her
picking garden.

CUT & DRIED

A small business growing the demand
for organic and sustainable bouquets.

Sometimes, small moments become turning points. So it was for Melanie Wenger on the day a friend she was visiting brought a dahlia inside from her garden.

It was so beautiful, Melanie recalls, “it took my breath away.” That moment sparked her passion for flower growing, and eventually, the beginning of her Wairarapa floristry business, Barnhouse Blooms.

Strictly speaking, it’s more kitchen table than barn house. Melanie uses any available space in the home she shares with her husband and family to create whimsical and playful bouquets. These are sold through local shops, and are increasingly in demand for weddings. “I approached local businesses like Moore Wilson’s and Bin Inn, and it just grew from there,” she says.

Melanie grows a wide variety of blooms including cosmos, dahlias, echinacea, rudbeckia, achilleas, zinnias, statice delphiniums, strawflowers and chrysanthemums. Her bouquets are eco-friendly with tissue, recycled paper and twine used for wrapping, topped off with a biodegradable ink stamp. “Everything can go in your compost bin,” she explains. “Permaculture is also important to me. This past season was the first where I went completely spray-free.”

The layout of Melanie’s cut flower garden supports this philosophy. Doubling as a home garden that she can wander through with a cup of tea in hand, it’s designed to be both productive and attractive. “Everything is interplanted with bits of this and bits of that,” she says. “And I use a lot of hardy perennials to keep it low maintenance.”

Melanie, a former flight attendant and childcare worker, is a self-taught florist. She confesses to spending many a rainy day inside watching YouTube videos, reading blogs and listening to podcasts to perfect her floristry craft. She is also inspired by other gardeners in her community. “Everyone is so good at sharing their knowledge.”

Melanie and her family moved to their lifestyle property at Te Whiti, south of Masterton, five years ago. The loss of Melanie’s step-daughter prompted them to seek a rural lifestyle and a quiet place to heal. Their home is part of a unique, eco-friendly community with no fences and 6.3 hectares of public space. It includes orchards, an olive grove, a large pond (with a kid-friendly island), paddocks, a coppicing firewood forest, and an expansive shared lawn for community social events. Thanks to Melanie, the lawn has shrunk a little. “I asked everyone, ‘Can I start moving my gardens onto the lawn?’ And they agreed,” she smiles.

Melanie hopes to expand the wedding side of her business, and is experimenting with wedding-friendly

blooms like such as amaranthus. She has also become adept at dealing with unusual requests from brides. “I once had a bride who suffered from tryphobia, which is an aversion to repeating patterns. It meant I couldn’t use any dahlias, for example, so I really had to think outside the box. I ended up using roses and had to run a few different things by her. But she was thrilled in the end.”

The property also contains a group of small cabins which Melanie may use to run floristry workshops in the future.

Meanwhile, she loves interacting with her customers. “It’s great when I’m dropping my bouquets at a shop, and a customer or employee there will approach me and say how much they love them.”

Her family’s move to the Wairarapa also inspired Melanie to start a vegetable garden. Her favourite crops include strawberries, asparagus, broad beans and globe artichokes. Melanie grew up near her grandparents in Nelson, and remembers her grandfather as an incredible gardener. “The taste of runner beans is so nostalgic for me, along with backyard grapes. The supermarket ones just don’t taste the same.” ■

Melanie’s 5 favourite cut flowers

- **Statice** Sow seed in autumn for an abundance of continuous blooms all season long. “Pick excess statice for drying,” Melanie says. “It is wonderful for wreath-making.”
- **Zinnias** “My favourites colours are the ombre, lilac or vintage tones with lots of petal layers. Collect seed from your favourite flowers for growing the following year.”
- **Dahlias** Grow in raised beds to reduce the risk of tubers rotting over winter. Cover with a good layer of mulch in cold climates.
- **Achillea** “For my dry climate, this is the perfect perennial to grow. Give it space to spread its shallow creeping roots. Cut it down in autumn so it can put energy into bulking up.”
- **Feverfew** The delicate blooms add whimsy to bouquets. “You can keep them as a perennial for a few years before refreshing with new plants.”



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.