



Flowers grown on site.



Olivera Milojević



Summer is peak harvesting time.

Cut & dried

One woman turns her lifelong love of dried flowers into a thing of beauty.



Popin Flower Farm welcomes brides who want to pick their own bridal bouquet.

Olivera Milojevic has always loved dried flowers, even as a child. "They are fascinating," she says, "how they keep their shape and colours for years."

When Olivera and her husband bought their Wairarapa property in 2022, there was no question about what they were going to do with it. Popin Flowers – as in “pop in any time” – is a flower farm that specialises in blooms for drying. More than 20 different varieties are grown year-round in a section of paddock at the back of the property, located just outside Greytown.

The blooms – including strawflowers, cardoon, statice, billy buttons, sea holly, blue echinops, achillea, lavender, nigella, scabiosa and proteas – are harvested in summer, then transformed by Olivera into wreaths, bouquets, basket displays, greeting cards and more. “I stand here with everything I’ve got and then decide what I’m going to make,” she says. “I don’t want to make what everyone else is making. I like to do my own thing.”

As if to prove her point, she shows me a wreath that features not just dried flowers, but a miniature outdoor scene complete with a bird, picket fence and lantern. It’s one of several products she made to sell at the annual Wairarapa Festival of Christmas in Greytown held in July.

Surprisingly, Olivera confesses to never having been a gardener before starting the business. “I didn’t know I had green fingers. My mum had a garden but I wasn’t allowed in there. However, I always managed to pick some flowers and sneak them into my room to dry.”

Olivera, her husband and two children immigrated to New Zealand from former Yugoslavia in 2002. Keen to leave the crisis-stricken state, their fate was decided when Olivera spotted a photo spread of a New Zealand lavender field in a gardening magazine. “I thought, that’s where we’re going to go,” she recalls.

It was a similar stroke of inspiration that led to the flower farm. “I was sitting on the couch one day and I thought, I’m doing to do a flower farm for dried flowers. I didn’t know if they would sell or not. I did it for myself.”

Olivera spent her first winter at the Greytown property learning everything she could about drying flowers, taking inspiration from sources, including garden expert Monty Don on YouTube. “Then I started looking around for anything I could use for drying.”

Initially, she sourced her seedlings from suppliers, but now grows her flowers from seeds after investing in a tunnelhouse. Flowers are harvested in summer during the hottest part of the day, before the leaves are removed and

the stalks hung upside down in a large barn to dry. The process can take anything from two weeks to a whole summer, depending on the flower and variety.

Olivera sells her products through supermarkets and garden centres, Wairarapa markets and fairs, and online to customers around New Zealand. Her bouquets in demand for weddings, birthdays and Mother’s Day. For brides on a budget, Olivera opens the flower farm for them to pick their own blooms and make bouquets on-site. “The ‘wow’ on their face when they see the flowers, and the smiles when they leave, just makes my day,” she says.

Popin Flowers is a side hustle. Olivera has a day job as an executive assistant at a government department in Wellington. The job allows her to work from home four days a week, and spend her previous commuting time (up to three hours a day) with her flowers.

“Being in the garden lifts me up,” she says. “When I’m tired from work I just go outside and pick little bits here and there. In summer I spend my lunchbreak picking, and on the weekends I’m often gardening all day. Every season I learn something new.” ■

Olivera’s favourite flowers to dry

- **Statice** keep their colour even when dry.

Olivera appreciates their many different shades of stunning colours from dark purple to all shades of pink and even blue.

- **Lunaria (silver dollar)** provides colour in the garden all year round, even in winter. It self-seeds easily. “Where it finds its place is its home,” she says. “I love the transformation from flowerbud to silvery-white coloured petals, shining in the sun like a little fairy light.”

- **Strawflowers** have stunning yellow blooms that make them resemble mini sunflowers. “They brighten up any bouquet in summer and winter.”

- **Billy button** look beautiful in a vase even if just on their own.

- **Blue echinops** have blue/silverish round spiky heads – a great sculptural element.



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.