GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Finding Joy in Bringing it to Others

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When you first meet Drew Groezinger, you find he's full of surprises. His personable nature and big smile are what you notice first. Then you start talking to him and you realize that he's super smart, but always looking to learn something new. He's confident (he really doesn't give a fig what you think), but he truly believes in himself. He's ambitious, but strategic. And he's had to overcome other people's perceptions of who he is and still managed to be a very well-adjusted person.

It turns out, becoming an entrepreneur at the age of 5 was just the start of his ever-evolving journey into horticulture. It certainly helped him establish Clara Joyce Flowers, a successful cut flower farm in rural Northern Illinois, at the age of 26.

An entrepreneurial spirit

Drew's family was there when Stockton was put on the Illinois map. Both of his parents' ancestors established themselves in the area in the 1860s and 1870s as, not surprisingly, farmers. His mother's family raised cows and had a dairy farm; his father's produced grain and livestock. Like many rural couples, they met through 4H in high school and got married young. But unlike many rural couples, they didn't want to build their lives around agriculture. So Drew didn't get his farmer mentality from his parents, but his grandparents and great-grandparents whose whole lives were dedicated to growing crops.

"I was spending a lot of time with them, helping them in their vegetable gardens over the summer," said Drew. "Learning the value or the concept of planting a seed, taking care of it, tending to it, and then having something at the end."

From there, Drew got involved with 4H, participating in expos and fairs, and these experiences got him thinking about what he could do with the extra vegetables he was producing. And, more importantly, how he could make

money with them.

Drew disproves the old thinking that children with no siblings tend to be shy and introverted—he was no homebody or couch potato. Before he was growing vegetables for 4H, he was making glass-blown crafts at age 5, selling them at art shows across the Midwest and turning it into a little business.

“Growing up, I was very busy; mom and dad never let me be bored,” said Drew. “There was always something to do. I didn’t have any siblings to keep me occupied, so it was a very hands-on childhood. I did the glassblowing for 16 years, so by the time I was with 4H, I’d already learned how to sell and talk to people.”

In middle school, he started selling his produce at farmers markets, making note of what it took to grow and sell. During that process, he learned about what it took to grow things on a bigger scale beyond his backyard garden. This experience helped when he joined FFA in high school and that set him up for success because with FFA he broke records. In 2015, he won state for his vegetable production, went all the way to nationals and finished second in the country.

Also during high school, Drew started working at local flower shops, which inspired him to start growing his own cut flowers. He figured he’s been successful at growing vegetables—why not flowers? Once he had a crop going, he started selling cut flowers at the farmers market, too.

“I realized very early on that I was never going to walk into a livestock operation with a thousand breeding cows,” said Drew. “I was never going to walk into row crop corn production with 3,000 acres. That wasn’t in my cards.”

Who is Clara Joyce?

After graduating from high school, Drew knew he wanted to market his cut flowers under a brand. He was texting with his best friend and asked her, “What was the name of a woman from your family’s history that you never met, but you felt a connection to?” She answered with Clara.

“Then she asked the same to me and I said, Joyce, my dad’s mom. So we put them together in alphabetical order, put the word flowers behind it, and that’s where the name came from.”

Drew’s goal was to come up with a name for his company that wouldn’t limit him and allowed him to change and expand in the future.

“It was romantic. It was feminine. It played into the energy of the flower industry,” said Drew. “And having done weddings previously in flower shops, I knew that I needed to have something that was a little romantic for a name, to kind of build off of.”



Since he was so young when he started the business, he also wanted something that made him sound older. He also changed his appearance to help give off more older-business-owner vibes, shaving his head, growing a beard and changing his glasses.

“When I was meeting with clients, I wanted a little more respect. Very few people are going to feel comfortable leaving their wedding flowers to a kid that just graduated.”

As he was establishing Clara Joyce Flowers, Drew studied for two years at the local community college.

But the desire to focus his energy on his fledgling cut flower business was just too big to ignore. He broke the news to his parents that he wasn't going to continue with school, instead devoting his time fully into Clara Joyce Flowers.

Drew admits that not everybody was keen on the idea, but he was raised to fully believe in what you were doing and to believe in yourself, which provided the determination he needed to make the decision.

"I had that mindset of no one knows what you're doing better than yourself. It's what has made all of this happen," said Drew. "Because there was no textbook. I didn't go to school for this. I didn't take a workshop, didn't take a course. It was just learning by doing. Failing, learning again and continuing to go forward from there."

When he started Clara Joyce Flowers, Drew's plan was to service weddings and other special events, which he knew would provide some capital right away because he had immediate plans to expand the business. The site of Clara Joyce Flowers is on the same property where he grew up. His parents sold him the land and he's been adding to it since he officially opened in 2016, using the money he would have spent on college on an irrigation system and a greenhouse.

Weddings and events provide decent income, but Drew and his team were producing more material than what was being used for events, so Clara Joyce Flowers evolved to service three separate markets. A majority of winter and spring sales come from e-commerce when they produce dahlia tubers and cuttings, and chrysanthemum cuttings during the winter months for home gardeners, wholesalers and distributors, which comes out of 20,000 sq. ft. of heated and cold frame greenhouses. They also propagate perennials in 32- and 21-cell trays for IGCs.

"We do all of our own dahlia propagation, so we dig tubers in the fall and then clean, divide and then force them for cuttings over the winter," Drew explained. "It's taken me a long time to build the collection of varieties to where it is now. We're feeding into a very niche market for dahlia collectors who want the fun, crazy stuff. A lot of those varieties are not available on the mass open market, so it's finding the collectors who do have those to put into production."

In the spring, all 20 acres of the farm is in peak outdoor operation, with just under half being perennials and three acres of cut flower annuals (like zinnia and amaranth). Right alongside this is wedding season. About 60% to 70% of what they provide for weddings is grown on-site.

If you've been paying attention, you may have noticed that there's been a surge of small cut flower farms popping up everywhere. And the breeder companies and distributors have placed more of a focus on this market. Drew agreed and I asked him why he thinks this is the case.

"I think it was a perfect storm during COVID," he said. "There wasn't a lot of things that you as a consumer could do inside. So taking up gardening was one of those things that I think experienced a huge boom in 2020 and 2021. Alongside that was the explosion of social media. Instagram took off, with beautiful photos of growers growing cut flowers, frolicking in the fields in their sun dresses during golden hour, picking beautiful armloads of dahlias casually as their two-and-a-half kids ran around in the background. So there was the dream that was sold."

A shifting for the better

Drew runs on a very lean staff—seven total to grow, harvest, take orders, create bouquets, ship product, handle deliveries, etc. on 20 acres. Drew said that it allows them to be more streamlined, but one of the next areas he wants to invest in is to add more staff to help sell and build on his customer base. It's a small group, but a diverse one, with people of different backgrounds.

Diversity isn't normally a word kicked around the ag world, especially growing up in a very rural area and knowing you weren't like everyone else. Drew identifies as a gay man and said that his journey hasn't been easy—his age isn't the only hurdle he's had to overcome to prove himself as a worthy business owner … and as a worthy person.

“It is one of those things that contributes to the human experience that opens your eyes in every capacity,” he said. “There are no other openly gay 20-year-olds in my town. I always knew growing up that I was different and I didn’t know what that meant for a long time.”

But even if some in his hometown don’t understand him, floriculture has. Drew has found an industry that allows him to feel valued. He can fully contribute with like-minded people. He doesn’t need his identity to be the main thing you know about him—he wants to be noticed for what he brings to the table, too.

“I’ve noticed it more at [certain industry] events, so I’ve noticed a mindset and paradigm shift for sure,” he said. “I think my biggest thing is just acknowledging that we exist and giving us those channels to experience that, experience that level of community or camaraderie. We’re making our careers in this industry and I want to know that I’m not the only one.”

Drew’s next big adventure (professionally & personally)

Last fall, Drew and his husband George got married in a small ceremony at the farm with the reception in one of the greenhouses. George is a music teacher at a gifted school in Rockford, which is about an hour from Stockton. (I asked Drew which instrument George plays and he said, “All of them, but his primary is French horn.”) They’ve recently bought a fixer-upper in Rockford and are working on updating their new home.

This means that Drew and George have had to maintain a long-distance relationship the whole time they’ve been together, but they’re both so busy during the week, it works. The distance allows Drew to re-set after a long week on the farm. If they lived on Clara Joyce property in the house that Drew grew up in, there would never be any separation for him. And he already considers his business his hobby.

“This is kind of my everything,” said Drew. “This is what I think about when I have free time. I’m scheming about what else I can come up with and or how I can better serve my customers. I’m constantly thinking about this industry in some capacity.”

Drew was determined to start his own cut flower business and went in with the best of intentions, but he always kept a realistic outlook.

“I went in with a very open mind of this might work or this might not work,” he said. “And if it doesn’t work, it wasn’t a failure. We learned from it. We learned what not to do or how to do something else better. So having that baseline understanding that this might be absolute garbage, and then taking that experience both as a learning opportunity for myself and our staff and being able to teach and train from that is very, very helpful.”

He said that people ask him all the time, “What’s next?” And for Drew that could mean anything. He keeps an open mind about any possibility, as long as it allows him to do something different.

“When I started this, I always said I don’t want to be doing the exact same thing 10 years from now,” he said. “I always want to be evolving or changing or coming up with something new or doing something different, continually building on the experiences that I’ve been able to go through.”

And Drew has already been thinking ahead. He said doing weddings provides a creative outlet and production planning forces him to think about trends and forecasting. And he loves working with the plants. But he said he wouldn’t mind working for another company doing sales or product promotion, hitting the road and talking to other growers about different varieties.

“I’m the type of person who needs to have the variation in my every day in order to stay fulfilled,” said Drew. “I can’t do the same thing day in, day out for weeks and weeks on end. And I have the ability to make that choice and that decision for what brings me joy and how I implement that into my life.” **GT**