

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Growing a Community Respite in the Garden

Laura Drotleff



Three years ago, horticulturists Karen and Tony Colini and their four daughters set out to develop a cut flower farm in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. The goal was to serve as a low-pressure, educational haven for the local community, encouraging folks to spend time outside, learn about plants and how they grow in an unintimidating atmosphere, and delve deeper into plant collecting, as well as dive into the art and science of gardening.

But the family's plans for the farm took an unexpected turn when Karen was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2020. She succumbed to the disease this past August and the farm's future without her was unclear.

Pictured: Karen Colini (standing) and her daughter Katie Cenkus pose with some of the cut flowers from their farm. Karen passed away from pancreatic cancer this past August.

While the farm started out with Karen's vision for horticultural education, each family member had an element that was meaningful to them—daughter Anna Kandra loved dahlias and bookkeeping; daughter Erin Salsbery is passionate about garden design and native plants; daughter Mary Suvak loves growing culinary herbs; and daughter Katie Cenkus has interests in

wellness and photography; while Tony always wanted to grow food for the family and add some animals.

"We'll slowly be adding pieces as we are able," Katie said. "We each have a little piece of our mom that we want to develop and move forward with on the farm."

A shared vision

Sweetbay Flower Farm, established in 2019, was based on a collection of gardens that Karen and Tony had built over a nearly 35-year lifetime together. The pair met at The Ohio State University (OSU)—she was a horticulture major and he was focused on landscape architecture.

In the '80s they moved to a 13-acre property in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and started Sweet Bay Garden LLC, an independent landscape architecture firm. Four daughters graced their lives, and the girls spent their childhoods playing outside, raised among the plants and flowers.

As lifetime plant lovers with a passion for clematis, helleborus, peonies and dahlias, as well as a collection of native species and trees, the Colinis held a shared dream that doubled in size a few years ago, when Tony convinced his neighbor to sell his rental property to the farm.

The original property was part of a flood plain, making it difficult to expand the way they wanted to, so taking on the next-door property allowed the farm to build additional gardens, Quonset greenhouses and an indoor workspace, he said.



Pictured: Sweetbay Flower Farm in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, is a place where the community can come and pick their own cut flowers, learn about gardening and enjoy the beautiful surroundings.

Around that time, Katie had completed her bachelor's degree in exercise science and master's degree in public health at OSU, and was considering medical school. But working full time in a hospital wasn't appealing and dreams of the farm continued to percolate in her mind. She and her family moved back to the area from Columbus in 2017.

"I was more concerned about population health and how to promote the health of a community," Katie said. "It fit really well with my mom's vision for the farm because growing up, I always had that connection to nature that she taught me. I think a lot of people are missing that right now and it's gotten worse with the pandemic. So my vision for the farm was to create a restorative space for people to come and rejuvenate their souls and find inspiration from the garden, and then take a piece of that and plant it in their yard and have that for themselves."

It was a way, she said, to use what the farm already had—a lot of plants and flowers—to share the beauty and wellness that comes from being around a diversity of plants.

"I've always been inspired by the physical and emotional health that is given by being in the garden," said Katie. "I was feeling like I could use this space to promote a healthier community through horticulture, so we considered that a bridge towards developing that wellness space for the community."

Community outreach

In the three seasons since Sweetbay Flower Farm was established, there was only one season that Karen wasn't sick. But despite her illness, she managed to work in the gardens, and even mentored students in a work-training program from KidsLink Ohio, a local neurobehavioral center for kids with special needs.

A group of three kids visited the farm periodically over the 2021 season, learning how to sow flower seeds, transplant them into the garden and grow them into a finished crop.

Additionally, Sweetbay Flower Farm hosts garden club tours and you-pick cut flower events. Most of the farm's

plans for workshops and classes were put on hold due to both the pandemic and Karen's illness, but the farm did forge partnerships with a cut flower collective and design network to promote the sale of locally grown cut flowers.

Consumer interest in cut flowers has been on the upswing in recent years, a trend that Sweetbay Flower Farm hoped to perpetuate and encourage.

"The challenge for us has been to make it convenient for people, and so I think that as we—as our farming community—can iron out all the wrinkles and actually work together to build a greater selection and a more consistent selection, then that will really help push the movement forward," said Katie.

In addition to collecting plants, Katie said her mother's favorite part about horticulture was "finding her people" in the garden groups and specialty associations she was a member of, and she wanted to extend that same spirit with her community for the "garden daydreamers."

"One of the best parts of horticulture for her was that it was always community over competition," said Katie. "That was one of her favorite things, I think, is that people are still willing to share their knowledge with each other to just help promote the green industry."

To be continued

Without Karen leading the vision and the farm's original educational mission, Katie said she planned to seek input and guidance from her mother's friends—local members of garden clubs, women entrepreneurs and horticulturists in the cut flower design network who are visionaries in their own right.

"That's my winter project, to rewrite the business planning and to talk to my family and decide what each person sees for the future of the farm," she said. "I know that we want to keep the property and keep her gardens going—there's no doubt about that. It's just how we can do that and create a sustainable model when there's so much that goes into it."

Their mom wouldn't want them to move forward unless it was the right thing.

"That's all she ever said, 'Don't keep doing this for me, do it for yourself,' and so I keep hearing that in my mind," Katie says.

In the interim, they'll look back at that original vision.

"I'm taking the lead on growing and offering you-pick flowers with photography, and integrating work with special populations into the growing and future workshops," she said. "My sister Anna helps with the bookkeeping and with identifying and dividing dahlias. Mary wants to offer picnics and is talented at baking using fresh herbs and duck eggs from the farm. Erin lives out of town, but has been a huge support and is passionate about pollinator gardening."

Although the future of the farm is unresolved, Katie and her sisters still want to carry out their parents' vision for the farm.

"They had always talked about the grand vision of what the property would look like and they've been dreaming about it for 35 years almost. And so I think we want to keep it going ... the best thing would be to see that come to life." **GT**

Laura Drotleff is a freelance writer and can be reached at ldrotleff@gmail.com.