

# FIELDS of DREAMS

A PAIR OF  
FLOWER FARMERS  
SOW A NEW  
BEGINNING—TWICE—  
IN MADISON  
COUNTY, IOWA.

7  
MWL SUMMER 2023



Adam O'Neal grew up in Louisiana. Jenn hails from Winterset, Iowa—and after moving around the country together, that's where they put down their final roots, at Pepperharrow Farm, a 20-acre homestead and flower farm 40 minutes southwest of Des Moines.



PRODUCER: KYLEE KRIZMANIC. PARTNERS: (CUPCAKES) MAY THOMPSON/PARINDA CUPCAKES, (COCKTAILS) JEFF NAPLES

WRITER HANNAH AGRAN PHOTOGRAPHER ADAM ALBRIGHT

*“We fell in love with the property, then learned to work with the land. An incline is good for our lavender because it drains the water off—serendipity.”*

JENN O'NEAL



Throughout the year, Pepperharrow Farm hosts workshops on topics such as arranging flowers, blending perfume and making candles.

New this summer: lavender soapmaking and botanical dyeing. Jenn (left, leading a class) says her top tip for making cut flowers last is to change the water every few days, rinsing and trimming stems each time.

**A**DAM O'NEAL remembers the first time he saw Iowa. Not visited the state. He'd been doing that for years, staying with the family of his wife, Jenn, over the holidays. (Gray skies. Naked trees.) No, the first time he really saw Iowa was on a fall trip for to Jenn's hometown of Winterset for the Madison County Covered Bridge Festival (yes, *that* Madison County): "It was like 60 degrees. The leaves were changing perfectly and dappling the streets. We were driving down the highway, and they were prepping fields for the next season. And I just could not believe how black the soil was."

For a decade, Adam and Jenn had fantasized about leaving their corporate jobs to run a farm—a country idyll of animals, produce and flowers. They'd toyed with the Pacific Northwest, where property often comes with fruit trees. They'd considered Colorado and Tennessee, places where they had lived. But Iowa hadn't entered the conversation until Adam saw that rich earth. He says, half-joking, that the sparkle in his eye that day revived Jenn's love for the state. She doesn't disagree.



That was 2011. The O'Neals had two young kids and a baby. The following years brought a move, gardens, cows, a llama, a farmers market stand, and two big realizations: Animals are exhausting, and flowers sell better than tomatoes. So they focused, and row by row, Pepperharrow Farm found its purpose—a dream quilt unfolding in patchwork stripes of peonies, zinnias, cosmos and dahlias.

Summer is the farm's busiest time. Before the sun climbs too high, Adam and Jenn drive an old hatchback into the fields and fill the rear with buckets of blooms. Within 24 hours, those stems will be bundled into bouquets for Des Moines' Downtown Farmers Market, dressing tables at a wedding, or starring in a workshop in the couple's barn. Because of that quick turn, the flowers stay fresh longer. "We have customers who come back to the market the next week, and they're like, 'Sorry, I can't buy from you this week. Your flowers are still alive,'" Jenn says. "That is a huge compliment!"

**OF ALL THE GARDENING LESSONS** Adam and Jenn have learned, one stands out: Plants want to grow. They have a will to survive. In March 2022, a tornado tore across Madison County. The O'Neals emerged from their basement to a hellscape of splintered trees and buildings. Only their house still stood. Recovering from such damage at the cusp of a growing season seemed unthinkable. Yet within days, money, seedlings and labor arrived from near and far. Beds were planted and a new barn raised—bright white and specially designed for classes and events.

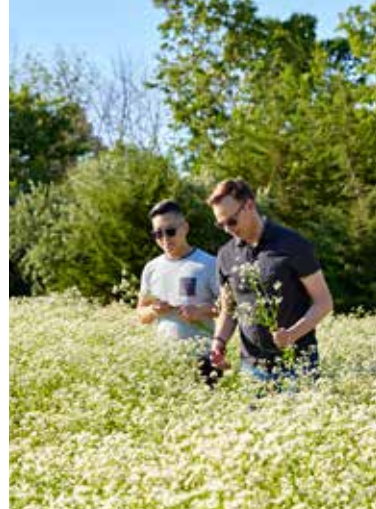
One thing couldn't be fixed, though. For years, Jenn had been nurturing a perennial lavender field. The tornado tore open the dormant plants' woody crowns, exposing them to the elements. "I just kept praying, 'Please wake up,'" Jenn says. "We got to June, and the lavender was still sitting there dead. And I had to give up. All the hard weeks, I had been keeping a positive attitude, but that was the thing that broke me."

Each year, the O'Neals think they've reached their flower max, yet "somehow we always end up squiggling a few more in," Jenn says. Adam's latest passion is seeding wildflower meadows of pollinator favorites such as bachelor's buttons and larkspur.





Adam and Jenn aren't interested in trade secrets: They love sharing wisdom. Their book, *Small Farm Big Dreams*, is a guidebook for wannabe farmers and backyard gardeners alike (Bloom, \$28). They also blog regularly at [pepperharrowfarm.com](http://pepperharrowfarm.com).



Adam saw opportunity in the loss. He suggested replacing Jenn's production-oriented lavender field with a more spacious one, with grassy areas for strolling and picnics. Although Pepperharrow isn't open daily, the farm hosts workshops and dinners and has a glamping tent. Roaming through a heady lavender field, a la France or Italy, could be part of the midsummer visitor experience, and a complement to lessons in distilling essential oils and blending perfumes. From lemons, Jenn says, they made lavender lemonade.

Almost a year to the day after the tornado, she walks across the farm trailed by floofy dogs and black cats. Sunlight glints off a shard of glass embedded in the dirt. Jenn scuffs at it with her shoe. The anniversary has prompted the O'Neals to acknowledge their lingering trauma, the buried feelings that turn up unexpectedly, like storm debris. But in the damp warmth of the new greenhouse, seeds are germinating. And away down the hill, the lavender has just woken up. **MWL**

**QUICK TAKES**

with Jenn and Adam

**FAVORITE TIME OF DAY AT THE FARM**

Sunset. "I'll go in and get dinner for the kids," Adam says. "But we'll come back out and walk around, just enjoying the farm."

**BEST SEASON**

Fall. "We know our break is coming. We get to slow down and appreciate our property," Jenn explains.

**TOP (SUMMER) FLOWER**

Adam has a soft spot for zinnias, Jenn for roses. "Some do well, and some don't," she admits, "but I love them all." She's had great luck with 'First Crush'.

**FAVORITE LAVENDER USE**

For Jenn, cooking: "A little bit goes a long way. We have a simple syrup kit that we sell for drinks." And they both love the science of distillation in copper stills. "It just blows my mind," Jenn says. "You put these flowers in, and oil comes out."

**BEST-KEPT-SECRET BLOOM**

Lisianthus, which Jenn says customers often mistake for a rose. It's hard to grow from seed, but if you see a plant at a garden center, give it a try.

**GO-TO GARDENING ADVICE**

"Start with easy flowers that help build up your confidence," Jenn says, like cosmos, celosia and zinnias.

*"It's awe-inspiring seeing things come back to life. I don't want to stop being amazed by nature. Never stop pinching yourself."* **JENN O'NEAL**



Adam has been perfecting a dough recipe for Pepperharrow's outdoor oven. At artisan pizza nights, they garnish pies with edible flowers, such as marigold petals—a simple trick that always earns wows.