A pair of flower farmers sow a new beginning—twice—in Madison County, Iowa.
“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

ADAM 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.

Throughout the year, Pepperharrow Farm hosts workshops on topics such as arranging flowers, blending perfume, and making candles. Next this summer: lavender soap-making 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.

JENN O’NEAL
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.”
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 unexpectly, 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.

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.

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.

"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

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 loves roses. "Some do well, and some don't," she admits. "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.

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 loves roses. "Some do well, and some don’t," she admits. "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.

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.