

BLOOMINGTON'S

FLOWER

Lady



it's

the classic back-to-the-land fantasy.

Purchase some acreage. Build your own home. Support yourself with work that's honest, good, and necessary: growing food, weaving cloth, making pottery.

Most who set out on this path, whether in the "back-to-the-land" movement of the 1960s or in more recent decades, find it rockier than they imagined. Manual labor takes a toll on the body. Injuries, even minor ones, can spell economic disaster. Days spent in repetitive

tasks are decidedly more monotonous than romantic. Financial security is nonexistent. Most end up abandoning their dream, or at least consigning the beloved activity to spare-time status in favor of work that's less physically demanding, more secure, and held in higher social regard: the so-called real jobs their parents always told them to get.

Yet some stick it out. Linda Chapman, owner-operator of Harvest Moon Flower Farm, is one of them. At 58, Chapman is lanky, muscular, and tanned. She wears her hair

pulled back in a ponytail, a no-nonsense do that emphasizes her blue eyes and strong face lined from many seasons spent working in the sun. If you're a regular at the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market, you've probably spoken to her. But even if you haven't met in person, you most likely know her work; her blooms adorn the tables at some of Bloomington's best restaurants, and her wreaths of herbs and boxwood hang on many a wall and front door.

How *Linda Chapman* realized a dream and learned to live off the land.

BY **Nancy R. Hiller** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **James Kellar**





The Chapman-Dale family (l-r): Anna Dale and Ben West, Deryl Dale, Macey Dale, and Linda Chapman. *Courtesy photo*

Three days before Christmas, the sky is gray, the air damp and chilly. Linda Chapman sits by her living room fire with a steamy cup of tea, savoring her first full day off in 10 months.

Flowers may be beautiful and delicate, but growing them, especially for a living, requires hard work. And to have even a chance of success, a flower grower's labor must be backed up with serious agricultural knowledge and a head for business.

"When people come out here, they'll say 'What a paradise! You're so lucky to live here,'" Chapman says. "And I'll respond, 'Very true. I do feel lucky. But this is a slave's paradise! What you're seeing is not just what nature provided for me. This farm requires constant maintenance and hard work to remain bountiful and beautiful to the eye.' We have nice chairs placed around the property, which makes it appear we frequently sit and admire the view, but my butt rarely touches them."

Early days

Chapman first visited the place she would come to call home in the fall of 1978. She was nearing completion of a bachelor's degree in speech and

hearing sciences at Indiana University when she met Deryl Dale, a carpenter who worked in and around Bloomington. Dale had bought five acres of rolling Owen County land, where he lived in a tent and planned to put down roots: growing his own food, building a carpentry shop, and eventually building a house.

The order of these plans changed as their relationship became serious. Chapman was interested in learning carpentry, so she and Dale worked side by side to build a 12-by-24-foot house with a small sleeping loft. When they moved in the following August, there were still no windows or front door, no running water or electricity. They would add these, along with square footage, over the next 15 years, as they could afford to buy the necessary materials.

It was at once the most down-to-earth, yet grand, adventure. "Coming from a relatively affluent background in Chicago, I loved the tangible rewards of learning how to do the most basic things for ourselves," Chapman says. They hauled water from town and became expert at repurposing their supply, using it for drinking or cooking, then washing dishes. They showered at the YMCA, where they were members, and

washed clothes at a laundromat. They started a vegetable garden, planted an orchard, canned their own food, and spent their evenings reading, by kerosene light, books about the mechanics and philosophies of self-sufficiency.

In 1982, their first child, Macey Dale (now the manager at Andrew Davis Clothiers), was born at home with help from a midwife. The house still had no electricity or plumbing. Their second child, Anna, also was born at home, three years later.

Chapman's business grew out of these beginnings. She began by edging the vegetable beds with flowers and was stunned by the resulting combinations of texture, height, and color. She realized that home schooling her children could be compatible with developing the garden into a flower farm, which she started



officially in 1989, selling bouquets at the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market.

Struck by the gorgeous floral bounty, market visitors will often ask whether she picked her blooms that very morning. She's eager to dispel such misconceptions. Preparing for market requires careful planning and intensive labor. Cutting begins on Wednesday and extends through Friday. Early on, the Friday work often lasted until midnight. As market regulars will know, all vendors show up early on Saturday mornings, but until Chapman had established sufficient seniority to earn an assigned spot, she made a point of arriving extra early, by 4 a.m., to



(clockwise, from top right) Deryl Dale and his carpentry partner, Steve Neuenschwander, built the gambrel-roofed barn. Chapman prepares bouquets, wreaths, and other arrangements on the ground floor and uses the attic for drying herbs and flowers. Decorative peppers are among the unconventional and surprisingly attractive components of Chapman's bouquets. With their lush, brilliantly colored blooms, dahlias are a favorite addition to fall flower arrangements. Work goes on year-round at Harvest Moon Flower Farm. Here, seedlings enjoy the sunshine on a late fall day. They will continue growing in a hoop house over winter.



(clockwise, from top left) The 2 1/2-acre farm is efficiently arranged, combining flower beds (not visible here) with structures for indoor growing during cold weather. Carmen Venegas, a neighbor, has worked on the farm since she was 7. Durable translucent plastic covers bent steel pipe to form a hoop house that stays warm enough, even on winter's coldest days, to grow succulents, which are native to the desert.

optimize her chances of getting a good position. She often drove downtown in the wee hours and slept in her truck until the market master arrived and she could grab the first empty spot. Dale brought the children later.

Business

Since those early days, her family's livelihood has depended increasingly on income from the flower farm — more so since Dale retired from carpentry in 2010 and they decided to go forward as friends and parents, instead of as a couple. So Chapman has to pay serious attention to the efficiency of the business, as well as to the quality of the produce. "This is a very small farm," she explains, "2 1/2 acres now, and just 1/2 an acre when we started." The rest of the 5-acre property is unfarmable woods.

"What's key," she continues, "is that we value-add to all our products to make every square foot profitable." After her first summer at the market, she hung her leftover blooms in the barn so she could sell them as dried flowers later in the season. The second year, she added dried floral wreaths in the fall and evergreen wreaths for Christmas.

She plants successively, starting seeds throughout the year. During winter, she starts seeds indoors, then plants the seedlings outside in spring. Perennial bedding plants such as columbine, poppy, and foxglove also extend her season; she can have them flowering in large pots by early spring, ready for customers to take home and plant in their own gardens. She also grows vegetables such as salad greens, spinach, turnips, onions, garlic, carrots, and herbs to sell at the Bloomington Winter Farmers' Market.

Harvest Moon Flower Farm made some major business investments in the early-2000s. The purchase of a walk-in cooler made it possible to harvest blooms at their peak and keep them fresh until market day, giving customers the longest-possible vase life. Dale and his carpentry partner, Steve

Neuenschwander, built six hoop houses — quickly constructed conduit-framed structures with sturdy plastic covers — and a more substantial solar-powered greenhouse attached to the south side of the barn.

The farm now operates year-round, supplying flowers to local businesses for 50 weeks. It also delivers freshly grown microgreens, vegetables, and culinary herbs to select restaurants.

Such intensive production takes its toll on the land, as well as the body. Because Chapman keeps most of her acreage in production, one of her winter tasks is to test her soil, sending samples for analysis to regional laboratories. She amends the earth with lime, manure, seaweed emulsions, and other organic material as necessary, in addition to fertilizing with cover crops such as wheat or winter rye that add nutrients when they are plowed into the soil come spring. The farm goes through some 250 bales of straw for mulch each year. Long soaks in a hot tub ease aching muscles.

It would be impossible to run this enterprise alone. For 24 years, Chapman's neighbor, Gay Venegas, has stepped in on a seasonal basis, bringing her daughter, Carmen, along since she was 7. Now, at 21, Carmen, too, is indispensable to the farm, as are Chapman's daughter, Anna, 29, who works there full time, and her partner, Ben West. "This is a family farm," says Chapman, "but it is really a two-family farm, because of the Venegas family who have been great neighbors, friends, and co-workers."

The seasons

After a few days off over the holidays, Chapman is back in work mode, ordering seeds and seedlings for French tarragon, scented geraniums, and lavenders. There's also tax preparation to be done, and the never-ending chore of analyzing financial figures from the previous year. And all the while, she continues to produce salad greens, along with greenhouse-grown bouquets for the Winter Market.

Early spring brings jewel-like ranunculus, blue-and-white anemones, fiery poppies, and French tulips. By April, Chapman is working 8- to 10-hour days moving trays, transplanting seedlings if the weather is good, and weeding perennials and fall-sown annuals such as larkspur and bachelor's button. Now the Bloomington Community Farmers' Market opens, ratcheting up the pressure.

May sees the start of peak wedding season and the accompanying demand for flowers, which continues through summer. Also in May

she adds a second farmers' market, this one on Wednesdays outside the City Market in downtown Indianapolis. June brings a third, in Indy's Broad Ripple neighborhood, which explains why you'll find Deryl, Anna, and Ben at Bloomington's Saturday market without her.

Though many of us associate summer with flowers, those are not the busiest months for Harvest Moon Flower Farm. After May and June, it's November that's most intense, with 14-hour days spent making holiday wreaths, centerpieces, and bouquets.

It's a life

Chapman is constantly educating herself, as well as others. She reads voraciously and goes to conferences as both an attendant and presenter; this past winter she spoke at the Indiana Small Farm Conference and, with Anna, attended the Michigan Organic Sustainable Conference. She contributes articles to the *Growing for Market* journal with advice on subjects ranging from managing flowers for weddings to creating diversity with farm products and marketing. She also has served on the board of the Local Growers' Guild and on the City of Bloomington Farmers' Market Advisory Council, where she worked to extend the market season from May through October to April through November. With Christine Barbour [*Bloom* food editor] of Slow Foods Bloomington, she co-founded the Winter Market in 2003-2004, serving as market master the first two years.

Chapman fondly recalls that when she initially began flooding the place with sunflowers, zinnias, and gladioli, Dale protested. "But Linda," he said, "we can't eat flowers."

"Metaphorically," she concludes, "we have been 'eating flowers' now for decades." ✨

