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PHOTO BY M. MARTHA FISHER

## *Flower girl on the Vineyard* LOCAL FLORIST, LOUISE SWEET, CREATES FLORAL MASTERPIECES

As a young girl, Louise Sweet didn't like florists. At all. "I never thought of becoming one. In those days, everything was very stiff and manufactured looking – nothing I would ever do with a flower," says the woman behind Flowers on the Vineyard. It would end up being her own passion for flora, rather than the dull scenes in flower shop windows, from which her signature style and successful business would blossom in the years to come. "Growing up in Pennsylvania, I loved nature and flowers. I used to pick flowers and make things all the time."

Then Louise Sweet came to Martha's Vineyard for a summer in the early 1970s and ended up marooning herself on the island, learning to call it home.

"I started selling flowers out of buckets. We wouldn't arrange them, we would just put flowers out for sale," Ms. Sweet says. "It became my life. I've been doing it ever since."

Her business began on Beach Road in Vineyard Haven, dubbed Tellurian, Greek for "of, pertaining to, or inhabiting the earth." The establishment evolved from a general flower store, selling by the stem, to its current multifaceted presence as Flowers on the Vineyard.

The drive to Ms. Sweet's business and home winds down bumpy dirt roads, scenic rock walls and serene, bucolic estates. She speaks fondly of her formative days as a Vineyard flower seller, when large shipments would come on the ferry and boatloads – literally – of flowers would be unloaded on the dock.

Ms. Sweet's home and headquarters for Flowers on the Vineyard is situated cozily atop a hill in West Tisbury, surrounded by gardens, a chunk of the house hidden in greenery and flowers. No vista around the property is without eye-catching landscaping – even the noisy, metal compressor box to her flower cooler's compressor is adorned with attractive vegetation.

"This is my workshop, my studio," Ms. Sweet says of a formerly unfinished basement, the third space she has designed and developed for her work. It's also her favorite.

Inside, a wall of timeless-looking stoneware vases makes a right angle to shelves of distressed silver vessels. A chalkboard is littered with marker-written reminders, a sunflower postcard and magnetic letters, one batch spelling "crazy." A weather-worn wooden flower cart Ms. Sweet has toted around the island through the years sits just outside the door. But no aspect is more noticeable than the immediately striking, fresh, well ... flowery, fragrance.

"We have our own aromatherapy here," Ms. Sweet says, laughing and dealing casually with a bride for the upcoming weekend. They interact like old friends. "I'm glad I found you," the bride says, here to pick up her flowers – dazzling Massachusetts-grown peonies Ms. Sweet fawns profusely over.

"It's not just about the flowers, it's what you present them in and what that feeling evokes. There are subtle nuances," Ms. Sweet says. She utilizes her time-amassed collection of vases, free of charge to clients, to "complete and put the little twist on the overall look."

Different sections of Martha's Vineyard call for diverse approaches; silver or glass containers suit Edgartown, up-island "just begs" for stoneware and vintage pieces, Ms. Sweet says.

"It is truly a unique and beautiful place to be," she says of the Vineyard, unsurprised at its destination wedding status. She calls weddings a central part of her business. "I love to work with each bride. Each job is a custom piece. I've never done the same wedding twice. I just sit down with them and get a really good sense of what it is they are trying to convey."

From each meeting, a detailed proposal arises, full of options, suggestions and price ranges. “We fine-tune it until we get the budget the client is comfortable with. I’ve never done any proposal only once; they evolve and grow with time. It’s a collaboration,” she says.

Ms. Sweet assures that Flowers on the Vineyard doesn’t necessarily mean an armada of floral elegance. “I’m also happy to do just the bride and groom standing on the beach with one boutonniere and one bouquet,” she says. “It doesn’t have to be a huge production.”

Speculating that she may have passed the 1,000 mark without knowing it, Ms. Sweet has worked with hundreds of events and weddings in her career – including her own. After a divorce and her two sons moving to college, Ms. Sweet married her high school sweetheart. She did the flowers for her remarriage – white tulips for a winter wedding in Chestnut Hill, a part of Philadelphia surrounded by beautiful Fairmont Park.

Flowers on the Vineyard go beyond flora to offer staging and styling services for homes and events. Ms. Sweet’s repertoire includes various décor for weddings; she can supply antiques, pillows, tabletop items, any type of bric-a-brac to tie together an event, to paint the blank canvas of a wedding. “You create this entire physical space from nothing. We have a million ideas and we love to share them,” Ms. Sweet says. But flowers are the mainstay. “Everything started with the flowers. All the other pieces followed.”

In a long chat about Ms. Sweet’s business and her history, the conversation continually returns to flowers. She is irrefutably in love with her work.



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“Our style is very unique. It’s not something you’re going to see in corporate U.S.A. at all. It’s a look I’ve developed over the years and really strived for. It’s seasonal, indigenous, and within that there’s so much flexibility for people’s individual tastes,” she says.

Ms. Sweet meets with clients and works on proposals year-round, occasionally working on winter weddings. She spends part of the colder months in California. She loves traveling, but flowers remain in the back of her mind no matter where she roams. “I love to get new ideas. I always bring them back here with what works here.”

She rattles off her favorite flowers instinctively: tulips, peonies, hydrangeas – “They drive me wild. I have to have them.” She quickly revises her favorites to include lilacs, and there’s a sense she could continue adding until the entire phylum of flowers comprised the list. Her favorite weddings aren’t as easy to cite. “I give each wedding, really, my full attention. So a favorite is really hard to say.”

Ms. Sweet is happy to report “almost nil” negative feedback; she cherishes baskets of handwritten thank-you notes. She’s worked with clients from all over the world – Italy, New Zealand, China, Switzerland, London come to mind.

“I’ve gotten to work with incredible people on the island – if you heard about a dignitary visiting here, I got to meet them and I got to do flowers for them. It’s another bonus to the business,” Ms. Sweet says. She prefers to go on the strength of her work and reputation than namedrop celebrity clientele. A breeze through her shop, however, reveals two framed letters of appreciation from Bill Clinton and Martha Stewart nestled in bunches of flowers on a galvanized metal preparation table.

Working with weddings, it becomes easy to get jaded to the importance of the day – but it’s also easy to step back and remember how momentous the journey is for each couple. “You really come into their lives a little bit,” Ms. Sweet says.

~ Zach Dionne