

How to Choose Last-Minute Flowers This Mother's Day

These alternatives to traditional stem-cut flowers are ethically sourced and reduce emissions

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Photo courtesy of Sebastian Kahnert/picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images

Need a last-minute gift for mom? Millions of Americans, roughly two-thirds of shoppers, according to the Society of American Florists, will reach for fresh cut flowers—the go-to staple to brighten Mother's Day. However, not all blooms are kind

to Mother Nature.

An estimated 80 percent of stem-cut flowers sold in the US are imported, leaving behind a significant carbon footprint. During peak season, which includes the week before Mother's Day, between 30 and 35 cargo planes loaded with botanicals fly daily from Colombia to Miami. From there, hundreds of mostly diesel-powered trucks distribute the flowers across the country each day.

And when they are grown locally, many flowers come from farms that rely on pesticides and fertilizers, causing health risks not only for farm laborers but also for florists and potentially consumers. One study found that florists easily absorb pesticide residue through their skin while handling flowers.

Fortunately, several alternatives to traditional bouquets are available. Here are a few tips on finding flowers that are perfect for mom and better for the planet.

Buy from slow growers

Between 2017 and 2022, farms that grow flowers and greens increased by more than 50 percent in the US, and now can be found in all 50 states. Some farms sell directly to consumers, and farmers markets are another great spot to find and purchase locally grown flowers.

To ensure your flowers are grown sustainably as well as locally, check an online resource like Slowflowers.com, a free directory of more than 800 US-based florists, grocery store floral departments, wedding and event planners, floral designers, and flower farmers committed to sustainable practices. Businesses listed on this directory grow botanicals locally, seasonally, sustainably, and without pesticides or fertilizers. Debra Pinzing, credited with launching the Slow Flower movement, created the directory in 2014.

"Slow Flowers believes that it is irresponsible to support the continued production and consumption of a perishable product that devours so many valuable resources (jet fuel, packaging material, water, to name a few), especially when there is a domestic alternative to imported flowers," Pinzing wrote in her essay "A Slow Flowers Manifesto."

Look for sustainability seals

While Slow Flowers standards are the most comprehensive, other certifications ensure that farmers meet at least some of the same benchmarks. When shopping for flowers at grocery, big box, or other retail stores, be sure to check for seals that indicate where and how the flowers were cultivated.

Flowers grown in the US typically display a heart-shaped seal from the American Grown Flowers trade association. This certification includes both organic and conventionally grown florals. An additional indicator of ethically grown flowers is the

FSF seal, identifying certification from Florverde Sustainable Flowers Association, which signifies that while overseas farmers grew the flowers, they used sustainable practices in doing so.

Flower farms from Colombia and Ecuador that receive the FSF certification must meet standards that protect the environment and biodiversity as well as the working conditions and occupational health of farm laborers. About half of Colombian and Ecuadoran flower farms are certified by FSF. While these farms are not fully organic, they employ a variety of pest control measures, thus reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers.

Further certification is offered by the Rainforest Alliance, noted with a seal featuring a small green frog. Certified farms must meet standards that protect the environment, support climate resilience, and ensure human rights. Like FSF, the certification requires a reduction in the use of fertilizers and pesticides, but it does not mean that producers operate a fully organic farm.

Choose flowers for the garden

Buying potted botanicals for the garden or yard rather than stem-cut flowers provides a double bonus for the environment, landscapers say. According to professional landscape architect Marina French, many plants sold at garden centers and even big-box stores are grown domestically, reducing the environmental impact of shipping flowers internationally.

Additionally, long-lasting flowering plants—especially native plants—benefit birds and other wildlife, provide nectar for pollinators like hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies, and help maintain healthy soil, according to Scott Vogt, executive director of Dyck Arboretum of the Plains. Native plants have adapted to the local climate and are often able to withstand its weather extremes and require less water.

Instead of buying a conventional bouquet, Vogt suggests looking to flowering perennials that can be added to the garden and will return for years to come. Perennials are low maintenance, and because they bloom for several seasons, they save on both time and money.



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Native flowering trees and shrubs offer another way to give your mother a long-lasting gift. Trees are early bloomers, providing color in spring when much else remains gray. They also provide a habitat for bird nesting and year-long beauty that Mom can enjoy each time she looks out the window. Like trees, potted annuals such as zinnias are also easy to care for. They'll last for only one season, but growing your flowers from scratch is a sure-fire way to know where your plants come from and reduce emissions.

Dried florals

While flowers for the garden or yard are low-maintenance, dried florals are no-maintenance. A dried arrangement or wreath will bring color and interest to your mom's home, will last much longer than stem-cut flowers, and is sometimes grown organically.

Many domestic flower farms that sell fresh bouquets also sell dried florals. Some farms specialize in dried florals exclusively, selling arrangements, wreaths, and other gifts. If a flower farm is located near your home, check to see if it sells to consumers directly. Some garden centers and gift stores also sell these unique gifts.

Whether dried or fresh, flowers promote happiness. Behavioral health researchers at Rutgers University proved as much: During a 10-month study, they documented a connection between flowers and an improvement in emotional health. "Common sense tells us that flowers make us happy," said Jeannette Haviland-Jones, professor of psychology at Rutgers and lead researcher on the study. "Now, science shows that not only do flowers make us happier than we know, they have strong, positive effects on our emotional well-being," Haviland-Jones told the Society of American Florists.

Among their many benefits, florals boost mood and emotional well-being, help create a warm and welcoming home, and encourage human connection. A little extra effort when shopping will bring joy to the planet too.

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