BRAND NEW DIRECTIONS

Business is BLOOMING

Meet the women championing sustainable, British-grown flowers

'Last year, we turned a corner and did 26 weddings'

Aizel Finch, 49, is the founder of Yalham Hayes Flower Farm. She lives with her husband John and their children, Cai, 18, and Sebastian, 13, near Taunton, Somerset.







TOP TIP

Trust the process. Social media gives the illusion that success happens quickly, but it rarely does.

THE IDEA

In 2017, I moved with my family to an old farm with land. I'd previously worked as a corporate marketing director, but I wanted a career I could fit with raising my children and I'd fallen in love with gardening. Having grown up in urban Manila in the Philippines, I needed to learn more about plants and seasonality (there's no winter there). So over the next couple of years, I trained in horticulture and floristry, looking for my niche. Along the way, I discovered flower farming and knew it was for me.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

My initial plan was to grow greenery to sell to the floristry trade. I got a bank loan of £15k and in 2020, I ordered six lorry-loads of compost to prepare the soil on my one-acre site… then lockdown happened. Over the next few months, as restrictions lifted, I asked for volunteers to help with digging and planting on the local Facebook page. So many people responded, including a retired GP and a local farmer. Unfortunately, the evergreens I planted did not provide enough greenery to be profitable. So I replanted with flowering perennials and annuals.

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

Connecting with other flower growers through Flowers from the Farm (FFTF, a trade association promoting home-grown blooms) really helped build my confidence and knowledge. Then I appeared in a *Telegraph* article in 2021 about FFTF's 10th anniversary. That gave me the push to take on a florist's shop. It was a big leap, as until then I'd only sold flowers for one Mother's Day weekend and Christmas.

LEARNING CURVE

The shop ran for a year, seven days a week. While the turnover was great, it didn't make a profit, probably because I was employing three florists to work with me. I was also exhausted and missed being around for my children. My heart went into the shop and giving it up was a low point.

In 2023, I relaunched, focusing on weddings and pick-your-own-flowers events. My husband didn't think it would work, but changed his mind when he saw how happy people were in the flower fields. I also reached a wider audience after being featured on the BBC's *Gardeners' World* programme, plus gardening clubs asked me to speak at their meetings and came on farm tours.

WHERE I AM NOW

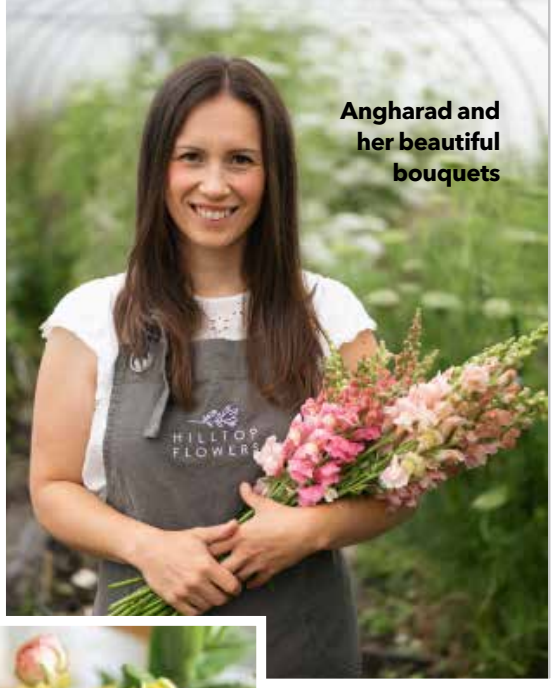
Last year, we turned a corner, covering 26 weddings (up from six in 2024). While the weather can make flower growing unpredictable, I aim to keep sales going all year. Wedding bookings start in January and flower picking in April, when tulips are in bloom. Partnering with local hospitality venues, I offer flower-arranging workshops with afternoon tea or supper.

Flower farmers say that while most businesses take three years to establish, ours take five. I've found that to be true! It can be hard, but it's also filled with joy, as flowers give people so much pleasure.

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

- **Start-up costs: £25k from a bank loan and savings (£15k on plants, polytunnel, fence, compost and labour; £10K on courses, admin, marketing and website)**
- **Turnover 2025: £65k**
- ***yalhamhayes.com* >>**





Angharad and her beautiful bouquets



'I drive to the field as dawn breaks, with a grin on my face'

Angharad Maxwell, 41, lives in East Belfast with her husband David and three children, Seren, 11, Ada, six, and Jude, four. She set up Hilltop Flowers in 2022.

THE IDEA

I had worked as an NHS physiotherapist for 20 years, most recently as a senior respiratory physio in Northern Ireland's largest hospital. I enjoyed my job but, with young children, it was often stressful.

One night, a friend came for dinner with a bottle of wine in one hand and a bouquet in the other, picked from her garden. It sounds crazy, but up until then I only bought flowers from shops, even though my garden was full of blooms. That revelation ignited a passion and I began to make hand-tied bouquets for friends and family using my own flowers.

In 2021, I hit burnout and took a sabbatical. I was pregnant with Jude and knew going back to work would be tough. That's when the idea of turning flower growing into a business took hold.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

After giving birth in November 2021, I began looking for land the following spring. By chance, a friend of mine knew someone who had an old plant nursery to rent. The one-acre site was ideal and only a 10-minute drive from home. I started working the land in autumn, one border at a time. When I arrived it was 'rabbit city', so the first task was to install rabbit-proof fencing.

TOP TIP

You can only throw yourself into a business you really love, so make sure that it's your passion.

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT

To keep it simple, I knew I couldn't sell online – people had to come to the farm. I considered selling at markets or at an honesty box, but felt this devalued a luxury, sustainable product that you can't buy elsewhere. To test the water I set up a WhatsApp group for local school mums, where I posted what was ready to pick that week. The response was incredible and the group grew into about 150 regular customers.

The other breakthrough came when I met up with event florists. Now, they tell me the colour palette they want and I give them a price per stem of what I can supply. They keep coming back, saying my flowers are better than any they can buy wholesale.

LEARNING CURVE

The fact my time is finite! I'm lucky to be supported by my family (along with a few self-employed workers), but I can only do so much. It's important that I do the cutting, select the best stems and condition them. Cutting has to be done in cool temperatures, so I'm often in the field at 5am and again at 7pm. Despite the challenges, I really love it, and I drive to the field as dawn breaks with a big grin on my face.

WHERE I AM NOW

Upscaling is next. We would like to purchase a new home with an adjacent field. This would be a game changer, as I could be on-site without needing my husband to be with the children.

In the selling season (March to October), work is split between supplying florists, DIY wedding flowers, gift bouquets and, most recently, flowers for the receptions of local offices. For winter income, I do talks, events and workshops. When I look at the business, I am amazed at what I have created!

BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

- **Start-up costs: £50k, from savings and borrowed from family, for rent, polytunnel, fencing, irrigation and stock**
- **Projected turnover: £25k**
- ***hilltopflowers.co.uk***

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