

Destination: Inspiration

FLORAL DESIGNERS
GATHER IN CALIFORNIA
TO TALK TECHNIQUES,
MUST-HAVE TOOLS — AND
THE POWER OF ARTISTRY



BY BRUCE WRIGHT

CORBIN GURKIN

Holly Heider Chapple has the kind of life many wedding and event florists dream of: a devoted following among clients and prospective brides; dynamic work and family life and her very own farm; a growing community of likeminded designers through Chapel Designers, the international collective she heads; name recognition in the floral industry and outside of it; even a major design product, now sold through a national company, that she helped create.

And yet — for all her successes, one thing Chapple craves most is community, which is a major reason she signed on to participate as a presenter this year during Florabundance Inspirational Design Days in January.

Launched in 2013, the three-day event in Santa Barbara — a popular wedding destination in its own right — brings together top wedding professionals in the floral industry for a jolt of inspiration under the California sun. Much of this year's programming focused on evolutions and changes in the wedding and event business; namely, how to stand out with clients, deliver top-quality designs and services and, well, not lose your mind (or own aesthetic) in the process, all against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive field.

For her part, Chapple insisted there is room for everybody.

"There are so many amazing, hard-working designers in this country. We all deserve success," Chapple said.

This month, we're sharing key takeaways from Design Days that you can apply to your wedding and event business to capture work that is more profitable, streamlined and fulfilling.

Reimagine Your Role

Several years ago, after creating a ceiling installation that she particularly loved using pillows and faux wisteria, Chapple made a small but significant change to her Instagram page: She updated her profile to read "curator of beauty."

If you check out Chapple's busy Instagram page today (94,000-plus followers and growing), you'll see she's added other descriptors, including "event designer, stylist, flower whisperer, queen of color play. Wife + mom of 7."



CORBIN GURKIN

BLUSHING BLOOMS A photo backdrop created by presenter Kiana Underwood and a lavish arrangement by Holly Heider Chapple both featured soft palettes in close-analogous colors.

The difference is purposeful and significant, she said, explaining that the change in verbiage and (more important, perhaps) the change in thinking has allowed her to explore more materials and products in designs and to reconsider the sometimes arbitrary rules of design and "good taste" that she didn't want to follow anymore.

"I don't care if it's faux, painted, dried, fresh, plastic, silk, sticks or twigs — as long as I can make it beautiful, I'm OK with it," she said.

That new perspective has helped Chapple focus on what's possible and to identify gaps in the market, which is exactly what she did in 2017 when she collaborated with Syndicate Sales to create and launch the Pillow and the Egg.

Both tools take inspiration from the traditional design technique of using chicken wire to control the placement and positioning of stems, but they replace the chicken wire with a hollow grid made of recyclable and reusable plastic. The Egg is designed to assist in

the creation of airy but luxurious, foam-free bouquets; the Pillow pairs with any container that has a round opening as a foundation for similarly loose yet abundant centerpiece designs.

A big part of Chapple's motivation behind creating the tools: delivering a product to fellow floral designers/curators of beauty that closely aligns with real-world challenges. Chapple noted, for example, that the Pillow doesn't need to be taped to a container. It can simply rest on top, which preserves the option of rotating the design in the container as the designer works. Without taping, the entire design can also be lifted out of the container to replace the water, minimizing risk of damage to the design itself. And the design can be made in a client's heirloom vessel without any worry about damage from the tape.

The new tools, of course, mean that Chapple has another title to add to her bio: product inventor. That's not a role Chapple imagined for herself when she



PHOTO COMPILATION LERINA WINTER

MASTER CLASS Business tips, trends and time-saving techniques flowed from the presenters at this year's Florabundance Inspirational Design Days. They included, clockwise from top left, Jessica Zimmerman, Kiana Underwood, Hitomi Gilliam, AIFD, and Holly Heider Chapple.

began her career 25 years ago, but it is a result of her out-of-the-box thinking.

"Don't let fear hold you back," she said. "Meet other people, create relationships, and seize those opportunities."

Play Up Your Artistry — and Build Your Toolbox

Something lots of couples are looking for in their weddings now: personal, bespoke touches and designs that are show-stoppers in person and on Instagram. On the final day of the conference, Japanese-Canadian designer Hitomi Gilliam, AIFD, founder of the European Master Certification program, presented a hands-on workshop that explored how to get maximum visual value from fewer flowers, and how to work efficiently while delivering that popular handcrafted look.

Gilliam started with a review of the tools in her toolbox: what she uses and how, with recommendations on quality.

After all, having the right tools can not only save you time but help prevent carpal tunnel syndrome, shoulder issues and other injuries that florists are prone to. Among Gilliam's favorite selections: an X-Acto knife ("the sharpest knife there is"), choki scissors for cutting wire, needle-nose pliers for bending it ("the rounded kind so if you twist the wire you won't damage it"), a small bolt cutter, a folding saw, a bonsai saw, a pruner, and Bind Wire, a Smithers-Oasis tool for wrapping and securing everything from flower stems to water tubes.

In the hands-on workshop, participants worked together to create nine installations, each using design techniques that could be applied in any number of ways. Versatility is key, Gilliam said. Common to all the designs was a strategy of building a portable structure that can be prepared ahead of time, with final assembly done on site.

GO DEEPER

Feast your eyes on more design inspiration from the event at safnow.org/moreonline.

"When you bring in your structure, partially decorated, and then you make magic with it in just 20 minutes, that's drama!" Gilliam said. "When clients see that happening, they're witnessing your skill and creativity, and they want you back."

Another of Gilliam's general principles for event work relates to providing a water source. Some flowers really need water to hold up over a five- to-six-hour period for an event; others do not. It's important, of course, to know your flowers and their water needs. Many roses, surprisingly, do fine without water if they are well hydrated in advance; hydrangeas, not so much. Gilliam suggests making a table with this information for the most popular wedding flowers.

"The other side of this is, with wedding installation work, it's better if you construct lightly," which means using fewer water sources, Gilliam advised, "because the heavier the design, the more mechanical issues you will have."

The solution? Build lightly, using grids that can be filled first with foliage and with sturdy flowers that are not wilt-sensitive. Then you have a support structure, including the network of stems, for adding other flowers in water tubes or caged foam. If you use water tubes, match the size of the tube (three-inch or four-inch), its opening and water capacity with the flower.

Go Old School

Think pinholders (pin frogs or kenzans) are tools reserved for hobbyists, or for ikebana? Think again. Among wedding designers working in tune with the latest Instagram-inspired trends, pinholders are returning as a viable alternative to foam-based design.

"Nature inspired, floral focused" is the tagline that identifies Brian Watson's approach to weddings at Myrtie Blue, his event and floral design studio on Florida's Panhandle. To get participants in the right frame of mind, he first led them through a visualization of a walk in the woods. His on-trend design style could be described for traditionalists as "updated vegetative." Mixing branches and other woody materials with garden roses, he placed stems in loosely parallel clusters, striving for asymmetrical balance.

Watson's design demo began with a pinholder anchored to the base of his container with putty. For further control, he placed a Syndicate Egg on top, rising slightly above the container rim.

Kiana Underwood, of Tulipina in Stone Ridge, New York, is also known for an opulent, organic look. She regularly works with pinholders, to the exclusion of other mechanics. A pinholder is more expensive than chicken wire, she points out, but can be reused (after thorough cleaning with a brush).

In her demonstration, Underwood advised designers using pinholders to place some of the heaviest stems first. She tries to secure as many flowers as possible in the pinholder — which can accommodate more stems than you might think. But it's also possible, once a strong grid of stems has been established, to position flowers using just the grid.

Since the pinholder is at the base of the vessel, there is little need to worry about covering mechanics, which allows an airy yet full look with fewer flowers.

Do More of What You Love

For all the glamour of a gorgeous wedding, the hours that go into executing a successful event can be brutal on personal lives. So, it makes sense that taking a more deliberate approach to growth — including more mindful goal-setting and more realistic timetables — was also a topic of conversation at Design Days.

"Don't let fear hold you back. Meet other people, create relationships, and seize those opportunities."

— HOLLY HEIDER CHAPPLE

"People think that once they set a goal, they have to start on it right away, but you need time to implement any big important idea," said Jessica Zimmerman, the owner of Zimmerman Events in Conway, Arkansas, and author of "The Business Behind the Blooms."

Her fundamental strategy is, "Look at anything that takes you a long time to do and that every time you have to do it, you're frustrated and bored. Then, figure out how to delegate or automate that task," she explained.

For example, instead of answering the same basic questions about her ser-

vices and pricing structure over and over, she now has a prewritten, customizable, introductory email that she can send to any potential client, along with an attractive brochure in PDF format.

Tired of explaining to people how much work she puts into each wedding, she hired a crew to make a video that shows it. The result has proven worth the investment: It's a persuasive testament to the quality of her work that justifies higher fees.

Social media is one arena where she insists on originating content herself, wanting it all to be in her own authentic voice. Lately, however, she works with helpers who put finishing touches on her blogs and duplicate posts from one format to another. To ensure a good supply of high-quality photographs, she will often pay a wedding photographer to come in advance to the venue, even the day before, and spend extra time getting shots of the flowers.

Her Instagram feed includes pictures of herself working, for an authentic, behind-the-scenes, personal touch: "I believe people buy from people," she said. "I notice that the photos get more likes and comments when I am in them."

She schedules a photo shoot every year in October to get shots for her website all year long. It's a part of her annual budget.

And don't be too modest when assessing your worth.

"If you are already taking on all the weddings you can do and you don't want to work as hard, that's the day you need to raise your prices," she advised. "People think they can't do that because of competition in their market. But the day you stop worrying about what other people are doing is the day you gain your freedom." 🌿

Bruce Wright is a contributing writer for *Floral Management*.
bwright@safnow.org