

The Organic Flower-Growing, Gathering and Design Guide

A photograph of two women in a field of flowers. The woman on the left is holding a large, overflowing bouquet of various flowers, including red and white blooms. The woman on the right is wearing a yellow jacket and glasses, and is looking at a bouquet of white and pink flowers. The background is a lush field of colorful flowers, including red and purple blooms.

THE 50 MILE BOUQUET



Seasonal, Local and Sustainable Flowers

Debra Prinzing | Photographed by David E. Perry

Foreword by Amy Stewart, author of *Flower Confidential*



FLOWER PATCH POLITICS

Driven by tenacity and passion, organic flower farmer Tara Kolla has thrived, despite many odds, in the heart of Los Angeles

In 2003, **Tara Kolla** left a career in public relations and marketing to grow romantic rows of sweet peas in her half-acre Los Angeles backyard and sell them by the bunch at her local farmers' market. In doing so, she never expected to become the poster child of the city's urban farming movement.

But that's exactly what happened six years later when disgruntled neighbors turned her in to L.A.'s Department of Building and Safety for selling her flowers at market. Claiming it was inappropriate for her to use residential land for farming, composting and teaching occasional organic gardening classes, several residents on her street effectively shut down Silver Lake Farms, Tara's small, commercial cut flower business, in the middle of her 2009 season.

It turns out that since 1946, the city had defined residential "truck gardening" as only the cultivation of *vegetables* for off-site sale. "I don't know why my neighbors don't like what I do," she says. "I hired a mediator to figure out what the problem was, but unfortunately, that didn't help – nor did my gifts of flower arrangements. They were just being spiteful. My flowers didn't hurt or harm them in any way, since I wasn't selling flowers here...I was selling them at the farmers' market." After city officials ordered Tara to cease marketing her sweet peas and other blooms, "all I could do was give my flowers away and ask for donations."

Facing fines, jail time or a costly legal battle to obtain a land-use variance, Tara dug in her heels and decided to lobby for a change to the ordinance. "I didn't want to lose, give in or submit," she says. Tara's fierce belief in justice helped sustain her during a yearlong fight for what became known as the Food & Flowers Freedom Act, although she acknowledges that it took a toll on her physically, emotionally and financially.

Yet Tara feels grateful for the wave of support from her community, including long-time Silver Lake Farmers' Market customers and fellow urban farming activists. "So many people worked so hard to help me, writing letters and coming to hearings," Tara says. Her confident British accent and striking appearance, not to mention her savvy public relations skills, attracted media attention and thrust Tara into the role as spokesperson for everything from sustainable agriculture to the plight of the small family farm.



Above: When Los Angeles flower farmer Tara Kolla was forced to take a hiatus from growing ornamental flowers, she diversified into edible crops, such as cilantro, arugula, basil and other microgreens.

Opposite: In addition to her own small backyard, Tara now uses donated land to grow fields of cut flowers for market. In the foreground, her late-season zinnias explode with color.



Above and opposite, top: Claire Acosta, Tara's only full-time employee, harvests microgreens. These are now just one of Silver Lake Farms' multiple channels of business.

At one important L.A. Planning Commission hearing in March 2010, thirty attended to support Tara's position, while only a single opponent, one of the neighbors, appeared. When the commission unanimously voted to endorse the proposed truck gardening changes, Tara finally felt as if the end was in sight. "I thought, 'wow, this is really going to pass,'" she says, with emotion in her voice.

On May 21, 2010, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously approved changes to the truck gardening ordinance, permitting owners of residential properties to cultivate and sell flowers. An amended city code now means that Angelinos have greater access not just to locally-grown vegetables, but also to flowers, nuts, herbs and fruits in every season.

"This ordinance helps increase access to locally-grown flowers and healthy, fresh foods and sets clear rules to avoid confusion between neighbors and the city," says L.A. City Council President Eric Garcetti. "This is a big step forward for urban farming here in Los Angeles that can be a model for other cities across the nation."

Home grown again

During her furlough from flowers Tara reinvented and diversified Silver Lake Farms. "I had to do something while waiting for the law to change." She organized a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) service with a local farmer and began growing microgreens like arugula, cilantro and basil where the sweet peas and ranunculus blooms previously flourished. She planted a huge crop of natural loofah, which is technically a vegetable (since it is a pumpkin relative) that when dried is sold as a body-care sponge. And she launched an organic garden care service, attracting customers from all around Los Angeles.

But Tara didn't give up on her original passion. On the day the truck gardening law passed, she broke ground at a new flower patch – a 6,000-square-foot piece of vacant land donated to Silver Lake Farms by friends of some of Tara's landscaping clients. It was Tara's to use without the threat of legal action. "A whole gang came to support me and help me get the rows and trenches prepped for planting," she recalls. The growing ground is located

in Glassell Park, a neighborhood about a mile from Tara's home, but the Silver Lake Farms crew nicknamed it "Groovy Canyon" for its hilly terrain. The property owners now enjoy attractive rows of zinnias, sunflowers, rudbeckias, cleomes and anemones. But to achieve this abundance took 75 yards of compost donated by Eric Wilhite from Community Recycling, a lot of sweat equity, and several pickaxes to prep the soil before Tara's seedlings could be planted.

She can't exactly clone herself, but the new truck gardening law does allow Tara to employ one person at her home-based business. She often works side-by-side with her assistant Claire Acosta, a recent graduate of University of California at Santa Cruz's ecological horticulture program. They tend to trays of microgreens, although Tara planned to reinstall dozens of frames for her signature bloom: pink, purple, white and red sweet peas for the season ahead. The secret to success with sweet peas, she points out, "is to keep cutting the flowers so the vines produce more and more." One sniff of the heady, romantic fragrance and it's no surprise why these are her favorite flowers of all.

Another employee works one to two days per week at Groovy Canyon, and of course Tara still logs time caring for several clients' vegetable gardens. But now that she is able to refocus her flower farming efforts, she wonders how she can juggle everything. "I had no idea that what I chose to do while waiting to sell flowers again would take off," she admits, breaking into a grin as she tours us through the new flower patch where irresistible zinnias in carnival colors line the paths. "I have a lot on my plate, but it's good and I'm fortunate."

Yes, she is a poster child for flower farming. But now, rather than spending hours lobbying city hall, Tara can be found at some of the most popular neighborhood markets in Los Angeles, selling bountiful bunches of fresh, organic, local flowers to customers old and new.

Her passion for flowers isn't one Tara often puts to words, but when asked to, she tells this story: "A funny little man with a red nose and knitted skull cap summed it up for me one day as he was passing my flower stand. You see, I've never been able to quite put my finger on what it is that makes naturally-grown, sun-kissed flowers glow and sparkle the way they do. They just seem to draw people in – at least, people open to that kind of natural, sweet beauty," she says. "He looked at me and said, '*There are fairies about your flowers.*' I think he might have been an elf."



Above: Tara began her flower farm raising enchanting sweet peas, and after a publicized struggle she recently won the right to grow and market them again. Silver Lake Farms grows custom sweet pea mixes from Renee's Seeds and named English varieties. "I start the season with 'Winter Elegance'; then I move to Royals, then gradually I move to the Spencer types," Tara says. "I love Spencers. 'Blue Danube' is my favorite."