



FROM CORPORATE MANAGER TO Grower Extraordinaire

After a globe-trotting career in the corporate world, Bob Wollam traded boardrooms for blooms—building a thriving flower farm rooted in family, creativity, and the enduring beauty of woody shrubs.

BY ROBIN SIKTBERG

WHOEVER BELIEVES IT'S TOO LATE TO CHANGE CAREERS IN MIDLIFE HAS NEVER MET A FLOWER FARMER.

More specifically, they have not met Bob Wollam. It's safe to say Wollam has lived two lives: the first as an oilman for Esso Far East, living in exotic locales such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Australia, and the second as owner of Wollam Gardens in the green rolling hills of Jeffersonton, Va., about an hour southwest Washington, D.C. While these two lifestyles look vastly different, the first made the second possible. And flowers have always been close to Wollam's heart.

"Although I grew up in Columbus, Ohio, I spent most summers at my grandparents' 500-acre dairy farm in upstate New York," Wollam says. "My grandmother had a beautiful English flower garden, and she often had me help her in the gardens—usually weeding. My paternal grandfather loved roses, and his backyard in Columbus was full of them, so I guess the genes came from both sides."

In his first life, traveling around Southeast Asia for Esso, Wollam took advantage of every opportunity to see flowers and agriculture. "I had quite the reputation," he says. "For instance, I flew to Borneo and someone picked me up at the airport in Kuching, Sarawak, and said, 'There's this place I think you should see, and he took me to an orchid farm.'"

In 1986, Esso's foreign operations worldwide consolidated, and Wollam was offered the choice between another job in New Jersey or a lump sum of money. "I took the money and ran—in large part because I wanted to work for myself," he says. "And I had always wanted to do something with flowers."



At age 46, with cash in hand, Wollam began his second life and set out to find a farm suitable for a flower business. He missed seeing the four seasons during his time in Asia and Houston, so he focused on the U.S. East Coast. He also didn't want to be too far from a major city. "I thought about Boston, but the season is so short. I didn't want to go further south than D.C., because I'm too much of a Yankee," Wollam says. "My criteria were: one and a half hours from downtown D.C., 10 acres, an old house, and a price of \$160,000 or less. My current farm checked all the boxes, except there was already an offer on it."

When an inspection of the house revealed a multitude of problems, the first buyer backed out. Wollam was undaunted and spent the first two years repairing plumbing, electrical, and heating systems to make the house livable. The kitchen area of the house was built in 1747 by the first German immigrants to move to the area, and an addition was added in 1819. Its beautiful, wide-planked pine floors were covered with shag carpet and linoleum. Once Wollam could move in, he started planting, concentrating on woody shrubs, something he is known for today. "I'm not exactly sure why I got started with them, but I got really interested in viburnums and hydrangeas and planted a lot of them," he says.

He likes woodies because they don't take a lot of maintenance, and many people don't grow them for flowers, which means he has a lot of product that other growers don't offer. "They're unusual," he says. "And mine are so old and mature—I produce huge amounts."



Facing page: Bob Wollam and a few of his gorgeous dahlias. *Photo courtesy of Bob Wollam.* **Above left:** ASCFG members toured Wollam Gardens in April 2025, led by Bob (front right). **Above right:** Wollam and his wife, Anne Montgomery, celebrated their wedding in 2015 on the farm and were the first couple to be married in the pavilion. *Photo courtesy of Bob Wollam.* All photos in this story by Robin Siktberg unless otherwise credited.

Wollam half-jokes he has the world's largest planting of *Viburnum macrocephalum*. "I thought I would be the King of *Viburnum macrocephalum*," he laughs. "They're gorgeous, but they are hard to sell because they are difficult to handle and because they are so big. Sometimes they have more than 25 blooms that are six inches in diameter on an eight-foot branch. You can't just cut them and put them in the cooler dry and then rehydrate, because they won't rehydrate; they have to be kept in water all the time. If you do that, though, you'll have a long vase life. And another good thing—the deer don't bother them."

Wollam estimates his crop mix as 40% woodies, 30% annuals, and 30% herbaceous perennials, including peonies. The woodies are planted in open rows all around the property. Some of them, like the viburnums, *Euonymus americanus* (strawberry bush), and 'Blue Ice' cypress (*Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra* 'Blue Ice', tower overhead. "Hydrangea Alley" features double rows of *Hydrangea* 'Limelight', which bloom in midsummer and make a wonderful setting for photos and cocktail hours.

Daffodils and peonies are a regular feature on the farm for bouquets and pick-your-own. Wollam says they are perennials on his Zone 7a farm, so they don't need to be replanted each

FAVORITE WOLLAM WOODIES

If you are interested in adding (or adding more) woodies to your crop mix, try one or more that Bob Wollam grows. Most were purchased as small plants from Spring Meadow Nursery.

1. ***Abelia mosanensis*** (Fragrant Abelia) Flowers are extremely fragrant, and the upright stems have a long vase life.
2. ***Calycanthus floridus*** 'Amethyst' (Sweetshrub) Flowers are more upright and a darker red than the species. Grows fast, can even be cut, placed in water, and forced in the greenhouse in just three weeks.
3. ***Chaenomeles* spp.** (Flowering Quince) 'Nivalis' (pure white) and 'Toyo-Nishiki' (red, white, and pink flowers, sometimes all on the same flower!) are two favorites. Bob's advice: "If I were to start over, I would plant all thornless varieties."
4. ***Euonymus americana*** (American Strawberry Bush) Glossy, round leaves provide great filler for arrangements, especially in early spring when other foliage hasn't emerged.
5. ***Ilex verticillata*** (Winterberry) 'Winter Gold' and 'Winter Red' have orange or red berries, respectively. The idea is to sell the orange at Thanksgiving and the red at Christmas. Wollam says he doesn't follow the rule of one male holly for every five females. "*Ilex* 'Southern Gentleman' will pollinate at least 25 nearby bushes," he says.
6. ***Heptacodium miconioides*** (Seven-Son Flower) Blooms in June-July with white flowers. The pink bracts last through August. It sells both ways.



Left: Even though it needed extensive repairs, the farmhouse was one of the reasons Wollam bought the farm. The older section dates to 1747, while the "new" addition (the shorter white part at right) was built in 1819. It is now an Airbnb.

Middle: A highlight of the farm is "Hydrangea Alley," long rows of *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight,' which provide a gorgeous backdrop for photos and a setting for cocktail hour at weddings. Photo: Courtesy of

year. Dahlias are a big seller in the fall, and Wollam overwinters them by covering tubers with straw and plastic. "It keeps them dry and warm," he says. "But you can only do it for two years, because in the third year the plants become weak. Overwintering isn't a guarantee, and he usually ends up purchasing plugs and filling in gaps where tubers didn't survive, but the labor savings are worth it. Six high tunnels are used for crops that need protection, such as ranunculus, sweet peas, Icelandic poppies, and heirloom mums. Two 140-foot rows of eucalyptus—mostly 'Baby Blue'—produce enough for custom work and bouquets.

Pest Control Made Easier by Growing Enough for All

Many deer roam Wollam's farm, and controlling them has become simpler over the years, largely because Wollam has mostly given up. He used to put up fences and spray repellent, and even allowed selective hunting on the farm. But now, he says he has enough for whatever the deer take and his own needs. He does spray deer and rabbit repellent on tulips ("There's nothing the deer eat faster.") and the *Hydrangea macrophylla* ("If you have anything that blooms on second-year wood, you know the deer want it in the first year.") But while nothing he raises is truly deer proof, Wollam says deer don't like most of the things he grows.

Aphids are the biggest insect problem, and he occasionally sprays Monterey Garden Insect Spray (spinosad), as well as a selective herbicide for grass.



Above: The pavilion serves as the heart of the farm, and is the site of weddings and many types of events. ASCFG members gathered here during a farm tour this spring.

Labor, Revenue, Profit, and all the Non-Flower Things

Asked if there was a time when he realized he could really make a go of the flower farm, Wollam says, “I don’t think I was that successful. I had years and years when I didn’t turn a profit. I tried, but labor costs should have been closer to 30% of revenue. I always got stuck at about 50% and was never able to break that. I still struggle with it.”

In 2016, Wollam got so tired of not making money that he put the farm on the market. But he never received a reasonable offer and took it off the market after six months. “The main reason I did it was because even though I wasn’t making money, I thought, ‘What am I going to do if I don’t do this?’” During those years, I developed a moniker, ‘Beauty is the only real currency.’ It will be the title of my book.”

For 15 years, Wollam employed international interns through a connection with a French agricultural school until U.S. immigration rules made it too complicated. While he enjoyed the experience, saying it was great having students from France, Peru, Switzerland, and other countries, sometimes there were challenges. The interns—up to five at a time—lived in a rental house near the farm and in Wollam’s farmhouse. “Sometimes they didn’t get along,” he comments wryly. The farmhouse has been turned into an Airbnb, creating another income stream—one that Wollam says is fairly easy to maintain and brought in \$14,000 last year.

Currently, four part-time staff work on the farm, along with some temporary helpers for events and crunch times.

Wollam has multiple revenue streams, which helps if one or more go soft. Farmers’ markets make up about 25% of revenue; Wollam goes every Sunday to the DuPont Farmers’ Market in downtown D.C., and every other week to a market

7. *Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Limelight’ (Big-leaf Hydrangea) Chartreuse-green flowers in spring, turning white in summer. Long-lasting in the vase, but it must be kept hydrated.

8. *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Grandiflora’ (Pee Gee Hydrangea) Large shrub or small tree with huge white flower panicles that open in midsummer, turning pinkish. Long bloom season!

9. *Hydrangea quercifolia* (Oakleaf Hydrangea) Very popular with customers—and also with deer.

10. *Physocarpus opulifolius* ‘Diabolo’ (Ninebark) Purplish-green, dark leaves and dark-purple fruits create a good fall look.

11. *Viburnum macrocephalum* (Snowball Viburnum) Easy to grow, stunning white snowball flowers, long bloom time.

12. *Cupressus arizonica* var. *glauca* (Blue Ice Cypress) Evergreen shrub that looks prickly, but is quite soft. Excellent for holiday wreaths or by the stem at retail. Deer won’t touch it.

13. *Kerria japonica* (Japanese Kerria). Both single and double (*K. japonica* ‘Pleniflora’) have graceful, long stems and are tough and reliable.

14. *Pieris japonica* (Japanese Pieris). Slow-growing, deer don’t like them, lovely, unusual weeping flowers.

Add IMG 9147 from folder to sidebar somewhere to make columns even on both pages. The image is of *Chaenomeles* ‘Toyo-Nishiki’



Top: *Viburnum macrocephalum* is one of Wollam's absolute favorites and is one of the first plants he grew.

Middle: Dahlias are put to bed for the winter under a layer of straw and plastic, a huge labor savings compared to diggin and storing the tubers.

Bottom: While the farm has built a reputation for its selection of woodies, about 60% of the crop mix is annuals and herbaceous perennials. *Photo courtesy of Bob Wollam*

in Arlington, Va., both about one hour away. His roadside farmstand and cut-your-own business bring in about 20%, weddings and custom floral arrangements account for another 30%, and wholesale florists make up the remaining 25%.

Weddings and Events Bring People and Profit

The “pièce de résistance” of the farm is the 30-foot by 60-foot pavilion, built in 2015 and the site of more than 100 weddings, including Wollam’s own. “My wife, Anne Montgomery, and I were the first wedding in the pavilion,” he says. The pavilion is well-built at a cost of \$200,000 and has stood up well to severe weather. Has it paid for itself? “Probably,” Wollam says. “It’s safe to say we wouldn’t have had as many weddings without it. Once people see the pavilion and the farm, it’s pretty easy to sign them up.”

The number of weddings per season peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic, in large part because the pavilion and farm offered a beautiful, outdoor option. During that time, there were 16 weddings each season, but that number dropped to just two or three in the last two years. “It’s been frustrating,” Wollam says. “Also, everyone who has a vineyard, a view, and can put up a tent is now a wedding venue. But we have a new marketing person now; she works out of Columbus and makes the contacts. Anne and I tour them around the farm. We are already doing better and will have a lot more next year than we have had the last couple of seasons.” He cancelled advertising in *The Knot*/*Wedding Wire*, saying it cost almost \$800 per month and provided very few good prospects.

Couples can purchase one of several wedding packages, which vary mostly by the number of nights they will use the farmhouse. Packages include the pavilion, use of the farm, parking, and flowers. They need to hire their own caterer, obtain their own liquor license, and, if there are more than 25 guests, rent a “fancy” porta-potty. Flowers must be purchased through the farm; if they are not grown there, Wollam sources them from local florists or wholesalers. “For instance, I don’t grow roses, and a lot of people want them,” he says, adding, “We also do a big business in custom floral, which isn’t just at our farm. We do weddings and parties for other people, as well.”

Wollam has a piece of advice for other farmers considering doing events: The more signage you have, the better.

Somewhat unusually for flower farms, Wollam Gardens is always open to the public, even if they aren’t buying flowers. Visitors are free to cut flowers from anywhere on the farm, unless it is marked with a sign. Clippers, buckets, and instructions are provided at a work table. There’s a price list for every type of flower, and it’s all on the honor system, whether cash, Venmo, or IOU. “We have a lot of people coming now just to bring their dogs or family and just enjoy the farm. Some pick flowers and others just have a picnic—we have picnic tables everywhere,” Wollam says.

This fall, Wollam is bringing back the farm’s traditional dahlia festival. “They were a big hit when we did them, and we haven’t had one since 2015,” he says. He’s working to fill in his beds of overwintered dahlias with new plants where overwintered ones didn’t survive in order to have his two large areas

full by September 27. Wollam's favorite varieties are 'Café au Lait', 'Peaches and Cream', 'Ferncliff Illusion', and 'Karma Naomi'. The festival includes bouquets, live music, flower crowns, and wagon rides driven by Wollam himself, where he talks about everything he grows—and of course, dahlias.

There's always something going on at the farm. Wollam often partners with local artists, food trucks, musicians, and other plant lovers to offer everything from open mic nights, weekly yoga, plein air art sessions, midsummer celebrations, and gardening workshops, including forcing woody branches, dyeing with plants, flower pressing, and arranging flowers.

At age 85, Wollam has decided to slow down a bit. At the time of writing, he had a buyer for the farm. A main condition of the contract is that Wollam and his wife can live temporarily at the farm and have a hand in the business. His sons and daughter have successful careers, and while they love the farm, they don't want to take it over. "I'm lucky I'm still healthy and I can keep my hands in the dirt," he says. "I want to keep doing this until I can't, but maybe I can work a little less. One of my goals is to travel more and see flower farms across the world."

That's strong advice he gives to everyone. "The best way to learn about flower farming is to go to other people's farms. Don't miss that opportunity. Go to other farms and steal all their best ideas! I've learned more from other people than from books. Even if I don't own my farm next year, I'm still going to ASCFG's conference in Albuquerque."

Wollam credits ASCFG for much of what he has learned. His first conference was held in 1993, and he served as president from 2001 to 2004. "I learned so much from Frank Arnosky and Betsy Hitt in those early years, he says. And now they are lifelong friends. I tell everybody to join ASCFG before they do anything else. If anyone wants to see my farm, they have to join ASCFG first." ■



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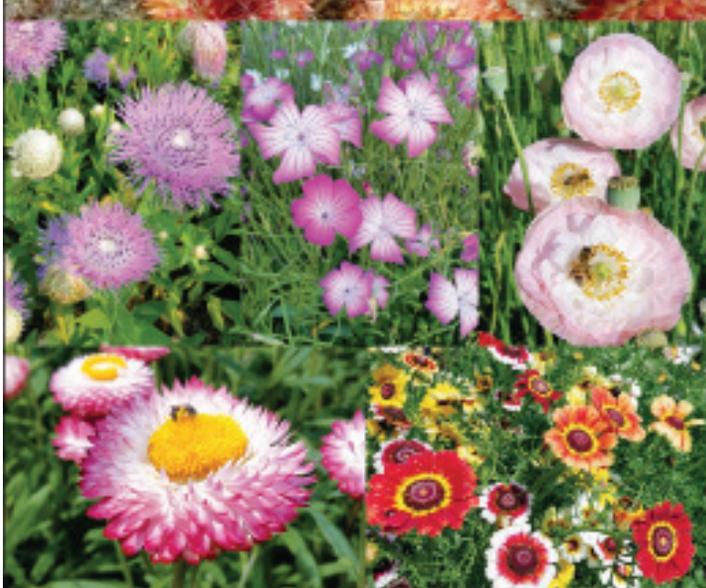


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