

People & Places

Flower grower follows her love

Joan Ewer Thorndike sells certified organic blossoms

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

If you're invited to dinner at someone's house here, you might bring a dish to share. But in Santiago, Chile, where Joan Ewer Thorndike grew up, that's an insult to the cook. So flowers are the gift of choice, and on many street corners there were stands selling inexpensive, beautiful blooms.

Which was why Thorndike's jaw dropped the first time she saw flowers for sale in San Francisco: \$5 for a single flower.

"I was absolutely stunned," she said. "It made my head reel."

She realized American florists were focused on what she calls the "Hallmark holidays," and put together giant arrangements for hotel and concert hall lobbies or "roundy-moundy" baskets with flower stems stuffed into foam. Not to mention fake floral displays.

"A plastic flower is a thing," Thorndike sniffs. "It's not a flower."

She allows none of that in her organic cut flower business, Le Mera Gardens. It was an Ashland, Ore., flower farm that had fallen into disrepair, and Thorndike and others had attempted to keep it going. At the time she was looking for a business that would allow her to keep her young daughters out of child-care while providing a bit of additional income, and growing flowers seemed an ideal way to do that. In 1992 she took over the lease, and her daughters spent much of their summers and after-school hours roaming freely on the farm.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Joan Ewer Thorndike owns Le Mera Gardens, an organic cut flower business based in Ashland, Ore. "We don't have automation," she says. "You cannot pick a good flower without using your hands and your eyes."

Gardening had been Thorndike's mother's solace in life, and Thorndike found love in it as well.

"I voted for flowers," she said. "I had it in my bones."

She wanted to grow beautiful blooms in a natural manner. As the business grew, she obtained USDA organic certification. The move struck some as overkill — you don't eat flowers, after all.

But it was important to Thorndike as she "hustled flowers wherever I could sell them" in the early days. There hadn't been a farmer in her or her husband's families before, and "no one knew quite what to do with that," she said.

She persisted and succeeded, with a major breakthrough coming in 2001 when Le Mera Gardens merged with Fry Family Farms, a

major organic producer in the area. Thorndike manages flower production for the farm, supervising the workers who grow, harvest and ship flowers. From a base in Ashland, the combined companies have fields, propagation greenhouses and hoop houses in Medford, Phoenix and Talent, Ore.

She continues doing it her way. "We don't have automation," she said. "You cannot pick a good flower without using your hands and your eyes."

The business sells to flower shops and a grocery chain, and does a thriving trade with people who are assembling their wedding bouquets.

"It's our responsibility to send flowers out the starting gate in the best possible condition," Thorndike said.

Over the years, she's seen

Americans increase their appreciation for and knowledge of real flowers. She credits farmers' markets with doing for flowers what it did for local food. In Oregon, production of cut flowers is a \$13.3 million annual business.

In early December, Thorndike was among three women chosen to be part of a "trail-blazers" panel discussion at the Women in Sustainable Agriculture conference in Portland.

Thorndike told the 400 women attending, many of them beginning farmers, that she fell in love with growing flowers and enjoys that romance to this day.

She said sustainability can mean "sticking with it."

"For all of you, that's what I hope — that you will stick to it," she said.



Western Innovator

Joan Ewer Thorndike

Occupation: Owner of Le Mera Gardens, an organic cut flower business in Talent, Ore., that is associated with Fry Family Farms.

Personal: Age 59, married to Dan Thorndike, third-generation operator of a family metal fabrication business. Lives in an old farmhouse in Ashland, Ore. Two grown daughters, Camila and Isabella.

Background: Grew up in Chile with an Australian mother and an English father. Spoke English at home, Spanish on the streets and attended a French immersion school, so is fluent in all three languages.

From there to here: Emigrated to British Columbia when she was 22 because Chile was ruled by a repressive military regime and young women were expected to be attending university or married, not at loose ends. Met her husband and moved to the U.S. in 1984.

About Le Mera: Grows about 150 varieties of flowers, branches and greens. Sells to 11 flower shops in Southern Oregon, and to New Seasons grocery stores in the Portland area. About half of her business is do-it-yourself wedding arrangements.

Guiding business principle: "My first partner is my land."

Online: www.lemer-agardens.com

Calendar

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20 Northwest Locations

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To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301.

Wednesday-Friday Jan. 4-6

Potato Expo 2017. Moscone Center West, 800 Howard St. San Francisco, Calif. potato-expo.com

Friday-Wednesday Jan. 6-11

2017 American Farm Bureau Federation Annual Convention & IDEAg Trade Show. Phoenix Convention Center, 100 N Third St., Phoenix, Ariz. <http://annualconvention.fb.org>

Tuesday, Jan. 10

Idaho-Eastern Oregon Alfalfa and Clover Seed School. Caldwell Elks Lodge, Caldwell, Idaho. Contact: benjamin@amgidaho.org

Thursday, Jan. 12

Inside the Family, Outside the Business. 7:30 to 9 a.m., BridgePort BrewPub, 1313 NW Marshall St., Portland. This session will explore how family members involved in the business can best communicate and collaborate with non-active members. We will share first-hand insights from a panel of non-active family members on how they have faced the challenges of being inside the family, but outside the business. Presented by the Austin Family Business Program, Oregon State University. \$40 per person. 800-859-7609 <http://bit.ly/2gQX6M4>

Thursday-Friday Jan. 12-13

Oregon Mint Growers Annual Meeting. Salishan Lodge & Golf Resort, 7760 Hwy 101 North, Gleneden Beach, Ore. oregonmint.org

Monday, Jan. 16

Oregon Blueberry Conference. 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Salem Convention Center, 200 Commercial St. SE, Salem. Presented by the Oregon Blueberry Commission and the North Willamette Research and Extension Center. 503-589-1700 or oregonblueberry.com.

Tuesday, Jan. 17

Succession Planning Workshop orientation. 9 a.m.-noon. This is the first of two workshops on succession planning. Cost includes planning workbook and food. Presenters from: OSU's Ties to the Land, Green Belt Land Trust, Farm Credit Services and attorneys specializing in conservation and farm and ranch estate planning. Western Oregon University Werner University Center, Pacific Room, Monmouth, Ore. Cost: \$50 per family. <http://www.polkswdc.com/success.html>

Tuesday-Thursday Jan. 17-19

38th Annual Eastern Idaho Ag Expo. Idaho State University Holt Arena, 921 South 8th Ave., Pocatello, Idaho. www.spectraproductions.com

Wednesday-Thursday Jan. 18-19

49th Annual Idaho Potato Conference. Idaho State University's Pond Student Union Building, 921 South 8th Ave., Pocatello, Idaho. Speakers include Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir, Potatoes USA President and CEO Blair Richardson and National Potato Council Executive Vice President John Keeling. <http://bit.ly/2fyayPE>

Idaho Noxious Weed Conference. Riverside Hotel, 2900 Chinden Blvd., Boise, Idaho. www.idahoweedcontrol.org

Wednesday-Friday Jan. 18-20

Idaho Horticulture Expo. Boise Centre on the Grove, 850 W Front St., Boise, Idaho. Sponsored by the Idaho Nursery and Landscape Association, this annual event offers seminars and workshops on topics important to the nursery industry. inlagrow.org

Thursday, Jan. 19

Oregon Tall Fescue Commission meeting. 6-8 p.m. Cascade Grill restaurant, 110 Oreg St. NE, Albany, Ore. www.opgontallfescue.org/

Friday, Jan. 20

Family Foresters Workshop. 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Coeur d'Alene Inn, 506 W. Appleway Ave., Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. The program will feature presentations on up and coming forest products, changes in Inland Northwest family forest-

ry, managing forests in the face of droughts, effectiveness of prescribed burns in preventing fire; research updates on forest biofuels, managing family forest habitats for moose and the annual family forest economics/policy update. Register by Jan. 13. Cost: \$85-\$90. www.uidaho.edu/FamilyForesterWorkshop

Tuesday, Jan. 24

Western Idaho Ag Expo. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Caldwell Events Center, 2207 Blaine St., Caldwell, Idaho. <http://www.spectraproductions.com>

Tuesday-Thursday Jan. 24-26

Northwest Agricultural Show. Portland Expo Center, 2060 N. Marine Drive, Portland, Ore. The hours are 9 a.m.-6 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 a.m.-8 p.m. on Wednesday and 9 a.m.-3 p.m. on Thursday. www.nwagshow.com

Wednesday-Friday Jan. 25-27

FSPCA Preventive Controls for Human Food Course. Idaho Department of Labor, 600 N. Thornton St., Post Falls, Idaho. The new Food Safety Modernization Act regulation requires every processing facility to have a trained resource person or "Preventive Controls Qualified Individual" who has completed a specialized training course (such as this one) developed by the Food Safety Preventive Controls Alliance that is recognized by the FDA. This person will oversee the implementation of the facility's food safety plan and other key tasks. <http://bit.ly/2f6cogT>

Wednesday-Saturday Jan. 25-28

American Sheep Industry Association Convention. Denver Marriott City Center, 1701 California St., Denver, Colo. www.sheepusa.org/About_Events_Convention

Wednesday, Feb. 1

California Prune Industry Summit. Orchard Creek Lodge, Lincoln, Calif. www.californiadriedplums.org

Tuesday, Feb. 7

Pesticide Short Course-IPM. 8 a.m.-4:10 p.m. Lane Community College, Center for Meeting and Learning, Bldg. 19, 4000 E. 30th Ave., Eugene, Ore. \$85 if registered by Jan. 23; \$95 after. <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/lane/farms>

Alfalfa U. Learn how alfalfa can contribute to a farm's profitability. Canyon Crest Dining and Event Center, 330 Canyon Crest Drive, Twin Falls, Idaho. alfalfaU.com

Tuesday-Thursday Feb. 7-9

Spokane Ag Expo and Pacific Northwest Farm Forum. Spokane Convention Center, 334 W. Spokane Falls Blvd., Spokane, Wash. Spokane Ag Expo is the largest farm machinery show in the Inland Northwest. <https://greater-spokane.org/ag-expo/>

Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers 2017 Convention. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Three Rivers Convention Center, 7016 Grandridge Blvd., Kennewick, Wash. This annual event includes the second largest industry trade show in the nation and a welcome breakfast. wawgg.org

Wednesday-Feb. 8

Oregon Clover Growers Annual Meeting. Noon-1 p.m. Holiday Inn, Wilsonville. www.oregonclover.org

Wednesday-Thursday Feb. 8-9

The 8th Annual Organic Farming Conference. Canyon Crest Event Center, 330 Canyon Crest Drive, Twin Falls, Idaho. The event is organized by the Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides. www.pesticide.org/events

Friday, Feb. 10

University of Idaho Cropping School. 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Best Western Plus Caldwell Inn & Suites, 908 Specht Ave., Caldwell, Idaho. This event will have presentations on fertilizer and irrigation water management, crop diseases, falling numbers, soil health, precision ag, unmanned aerial systems and a drone flight demonstration (weather permitting). CEU's available. The cost is \$20 and includes breakfast and lunch. owalsh@uidaho.edu, 208-722-6701

Friday-Sunday Feb. 10-12

2017 Women's Conference. Chico Hot Springs, 163 Chico Road, Pray, Mont. Women's leadership, communication and other agriculture-related topics will be discussed. Sponsored by the Montana Farmers Union. montanafarmersunion.com

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Index

California 9
Idaho 8
Markets 13
Opinion 6
Oregon 10
Washington 11

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