

Debra Bouwer, Shari Akal and their budding flower business

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Brightening the florist space in Cape Town with a fresh perspective for sourcing flowers from local farms and delivering surprise bunches according to what's in season are Debra Bouwer and Shari Akal of [Bouwer Flowers](#).

The online shop has grown in just a few months from offering their signature Bouwer Bunch to a bespoke Mervyn Gers vase shaped to complement the style of the bouquet, and a Market Bunch featuring a single type of flower or foliage – this week they're wrapping pink peonies.

"We like to compare the Bouwer or Market Bunch concept to a weekly veggie box – based on seasonality, our bunches feature the best quality and most abundant flowers our local farms are producing at the time. This means that what you will receive will be different, and a surprise, each time you order," they explain.



Picture: Supplied/[HelloPictures Photography](#)

"Some customers are reluctant to order a bunch they haven't chosen themselves because choosing from a set of options is what people have come to expect from florists. Our hope is that through our process our customers will be exposed to new flower types and colour combinations that they might not have been otherwise, and that they will learn more about seasonality and what is being grown locally in the Cape..."

"It's important to us to know exactly where our blooms have come from, who the people are that have had a hand in their

journey, and to lend as much support as we can to the Cape farmers who need it.”

Here, Debra and Shari share their part in this journey of flower-to-table and their joy to bring beauty and ‘presentness’ into everyday life.

■ Why did you decide to start a flower business, and why online?

Debra: Flowers were something that found me at an interesting time in my life. Being a florist was not something I always dreamt of doing but when I took a floristry course while living in Sydney, Australia, something clicked. After being exposed to what florists were doing overseas, I couldn't help but see a gap in the market in SA for flowers with a less commercial aesthetic, at an accessible price point.

Shari: Due to many, many childhood viewings of the 90's film *Bed of Roses*, I have always wanted to be a florist but I imagined it as a career path I would walk down a little later in life. However, when I became familiar with what Bouwer was all about, I didn't want to miss the opportunity to be a part of a brand and concept I believed in so strongly. So I moved up the floristry plans in the life calendar and started 'business wooing' Debra.



Debra Bouwer (front) and Shari Akal (back)

Picture: Supplied/[Elize Strydom](#)

Debra and Shari: There are many reasons why we decided to create an online store – the first is ease for the customer. Someone can put through an order for either a Bouwer Bunch or a Market Bunch, fill in the address and message details, make payment and even select a vessel from their desks at work. This obviously saves the time of having to visit a physical store. Online also keeps us flexible – we can scale quickly as a business, and service various areas of the city, in a way that a traditional bricks and mortar florist cannot. Finally, online is just efficient. We buy our flowers from farms according to the orders we have (so there is no wastage) and we work out of a space that focuses on creating bunches and arrangements, without worrying about foot traffic and shopfitting.

■ How did you meet and why did you decide to go into business together? When was this?

Debra: Shari and I had been acquaintances for some time – our husbands grew up as neighbours and we had a few mutual friends. Our business 'courtship' began at the beginning of 2015, shortly after I had started Bouwer Flowers Durban. Over almost a year we got to know each other better, with Shari flying out to Durban to assist with weddings and making time to discuss the various options of how things could work, before we formalised our partnership. When things did eventually become official in March 2016, we felt confident that there was a synergy with our personalities, that our strengths complemented each other, that we were familiar with each other's weaknesses and there was a good level of trust between us. We are still always learning about each other and about ourselves, but the load is definitely lessened by working together and it's fantastic to have another person to bounce ideas off and lean on for their talents.

Shari: I completely agree with what Deb has said and just want to echo what an aid and support having a partner is. Deb has such a fantastic aesthetic and is, in my opinion, a very bold and capable entrepreneur. She excels in many areas

where I do not and it is so lovely to partner with someone who can look at a situation differently to the way you do and offer a new, and much needed, perspective.

■ You started the business in Durban and soon moved to Cape Town. Why is this, and what challenges did this bring about?

Debra: The idea had originally been for Shari to start the Cape Town branch of Bouwer Flowers, and for me to continue with the Durban branch, but for personal reasons, our family ended up in Cape Town in the December of 2015, with me pregnant and my husband starting out in a new job. This turned out to be fortuitous, as we were able to forge the way in the Cape Town venture together and having a second person on board definitely helped when our daughter arrived in February this year.

Shari: As ready as I was to head up the Cape Town branch of Bouwer Flowers, I was really happy when Debs told me she was moving to Cape Town. It is just so much more fun to build a business as a team. Our initial plan was to keep the Durban branch open and have it operate in conjunction with the new Cape Town branch. Unfortunately, for various reasons, it became difficult to manage the Durban branch from another province and we had to close. We remain hopeful that Bouwer Bunches will be brightening up spaces in Durban again in the future (and with any luck, in Joburg too).

Debra and Shari: Our biggest challenge in Cape Town was establishing our supplier base. Without a central flower market, we had a lot of researching to do, finding the farms we wanted to work with and establishing good, working relationships with them. When the farms are widespread and a good distance out the city, each with a fairly narrow (although wonderful!) assortment of flowers, creating a mixed bunch that works from both a colour and texture perspective can be challenging. We also had to relook at our pricing structure to account for delivery costs from multiple farms and address a new city with different requirements from a customer delivery perspective.

Together with establishing new relationships with suppliers and learning how they work, familiarising customers with our products and getting them to understand our concept has taken some work.

■ Whereabouts are you based in Cape Town?

We currently work out of a collaborative studio in Woodstock called [Bright Creative](#). We are surrounded by a great bunch of people that feed our creativity and help us lug buckets of flowers up the stairs when the lift is broken too.

■ Comment on your collaboration with Mervyn Gers.

Our collaboration with Mervyn began with an appreciation of his minimal, functional aesthetic. Despite being small fry when compared to most of his clients, he took the time to discuss the design we were looking for. The main focus was on how the shape would complement the Bouwer Bunch. The wide base of the vase he has created allows the stems room to expand, increasing the size of the bunch and the elongated 'back' of the vase mimics the bunch itself, which is most often designed to be displayed from a particular angle, i.e. on a reception desk or dresser. Once we had established the shape and size we, together with some of his team, debated colours at length.

■ What inspires each bunch?

We generally take our cue from whatever has just come into season and excites us because of its particular texture or colour. We'll then design the rest of the elements around this, incorporating greenery and flowers that add both volume



and interest.

■ **When did you introduce the Market Bunch, and what has been the response?**

The soft launch of the Market Bunch has been fairly recent, about three months ago, and we plan to promote it further in the coming year. In this short time the Market Bunch hasn't proved as popular as our Bouwer Bunch, but we believe that there is a particular market to which this product will appeal. Because it features only one type of seasonal flower, the Market Bunch is ideally suited to more contemporary retail spaces or to brightening the homes of our customers who prefer a more minimalist aesthetic.

■ **What is your bestseller, and why do you think that is?**

The Bouwer Bunch is our hero product as it's well suited to most of the reasons people order flowers – birthdays, congratulations, 'I'm thinking of you' as well as 'just because'. It lends natural beauty to your home and can create impact at your place of work. From those that order from us frequently, we know that customers have come to expect a certain aesthetic and size from the Bouwer Bunch, even though it is different every time we deliver, incorporating different flowers according to season. Because it was our first product, we've spent a lot of time establishing the concept of a seasonal mix of flowers, ordered online and delivered to your door.

■ **What is the general ratio of once-off purchases to subscriptions?**

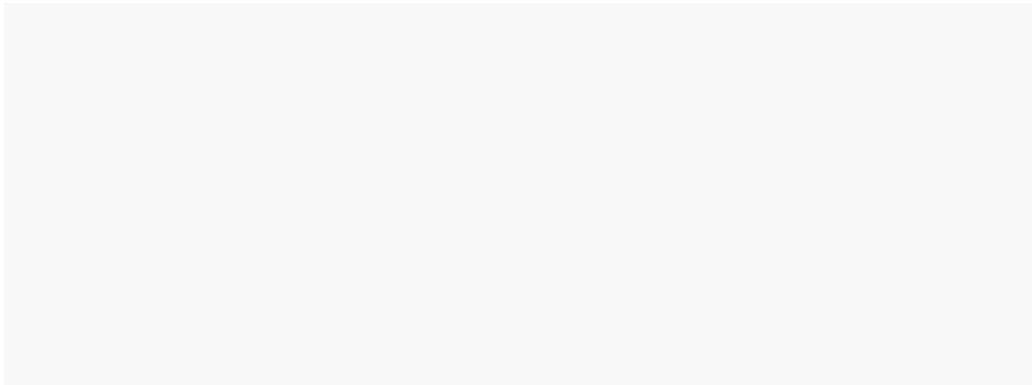
Sales are still predominantly driven by gifts and 'occasion' flowers – birthdays, engagements, new babies, promotions, etc. One of the central tenets of our philosophy is that every occasion is one for giving flowers; that even 'ordinary' life moments are worthy of acknowledgement and celebration. While we love being part of the big events, we'd really like to see people treating themselves to flowers in their homes or work spaces on a regular basis, bringing beauty and a 'presentness' into their everyday routines.

■ **You also do weddings and events, and say you're at your best when taking on something 'a little bit different'. Care to elaborate?**

Weddings generally present themselves as wonderful creative opportunities, with the budgets, teams and scope to really create impact using flowers. Because each couple is so different, with a vision to create something that expresses who they are as individuals and as a team, we enjoy the challenge of interpreting personality into tangible elements – colour, texture, types of flowers and styling. This is all the more fun when the brief is a little left of field and allows us to play with strange textures like lotus pods, dried cones, big lush leaves and fruits and veg, or challenges us with something big and dramatic, like a giant flower wall or hanging installation.

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Styled shoot | Using lush greenery and playing with texture to create something a little different 💎💎
Photography @debbielourens_photographer Coordination & Styling @happinestweddings Jewellery @merakijewellerydesign & @prestwichcollection Dress @theweddingcollectivepta
A photo posted by hello@bouwerflowers.com (@bouwerflowers) on Nov 16, 2016 at 1:45am PST

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■ How do you market yourselves?

Being a small business, one of the biggest challenges we face is figuring out how to use our limited resources to market ourselves effectively. In the past, we've relied heavily on collaborations to get our name and product out there, as well as developing strategic partnerships with wedding coordinators, stores and influencers. Word of mouth and exposure through our social media has also gone a long way, with Instagram being our preferred platform.

■ You source flowers and curate each bunch according to what's in season and in abundance at local farms. Why is this important to you?

It's important to us to know exactly where our blooms have come from, who the people are that have had a hand in their journey, and to lend as much support as we can to the Cape farmers who need it. As convenient as a flower market is, each bunch has become removed from the people who grew and harvested it. Sourcing local, seasonal flowers also reduces the carbon footprint of each Bouwer or Market Bunch and because they don't spend days in various cold rooms, they're really fresh, arriving at your door less than 48 hours after harvest.

■ Describe a day in the life of a Bouwer Flowers' gal.

A day usually begins with unpacking and prepping the flowers that have arrived overnight from local farms. This is one of the best parts and we tend to get almost giddy over anything particularly beautiful or deliciously fragrant. We then head out for a coffee run while we chat over the day and our priorities and because well, coffee. Back in studio we create the bunches, wet wrap them and package them until early afternoon when we'll be meeting brides, working on wedding quotes, writing out cards, liaising with our delivery partners and answering emails.

■ What is the best part of your job, and why?

Debra: Seeing a concept come together is incredibly rewarding – after months of planning and long hours of creating and problem solving, the final impact of a space decked out in florals is pretty special. Albeit mixed with a fair amount of exhaustion and relief, looking over our creations as we leave a venue brings with it a sweet sense of accomplishment and creative catharsis.

Shari: I enjoy working with my hands to create something tangible, fragrant and beautiful. I love three-dimensional design and to be able to create an arrangement or installation with something as visually stunning as flowers is so satisfying. We also love hearing how our bunches might have made someone feel loved, cared for or cheered up!

■ What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Debra: I'm a big fan of the [Lean Startup](#) methodology and I always encourage people to get stuck in, try things and refine the idea on the go. Launching with a minimum viable product has a lot of benefits, the foremost being that flexibility and feedback allows for the opportunity to change and make informed decisions. This obviously needs to be tempered with strategic thought, excellence and care.

Shari: I completely agree with Deb and to add to that I would advise aspiring entrepreneurs to expect the road to be bumpy. Building a business takes time, one is likely to make mistakes and it is not often that ideas gain traction immediately. While always improving and striving for excellence, don't be too hard on yourself and be patient.

■ What is your growth strategy, or any exciting plans you're ready to share?

While we'd love to deliver in other cities (this is something we're often asked!) our focus for the moment is Cape Town. We'd love to expand our delivery zones in time to reach more areas, delivering more flowers to homes, offices, restaurants, retail stores and hotels. We're also always looking to refine our delivery systems so that they're efficient, cost effective and

environmentally friendly – we dream of having flowers delivered by bikes in parts of the city one day!

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Bouwer Bunch | Happy to announce the introduction of 'Delivery Zone 2' for our Bouwer Bunch. At an extra charge we're now able to reach the likes of Hout Bay, Milnerton, Tokai and Muizenberg 💎💎

A photo posted by hello@bouwerflowers.com (@bouwerflowers) on Nov 23, 2016 at 12:27am PST

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To order flowers or find out more about their weddings and events packages, go to [BouwerFlowers.com](https://www.bouwerflowers.com) or contact hello@bouwerflowers.com. Bunches are priced at R115 for a Market Bunch, R229 for a Bouwer Bunch and R660 for a Bouwer Bunch subscription of 3 deliveries fortnightly.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com

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