

Balet plant nursery in Malta prepares for Earth Day celebration

By Pam Abrams, *Times Union*

Published April 5, 2023



Owner Suzanne Haight is seen potting plants in a greenhouse at Balet Flowers & Design on Wednesday, March 22, 2023 in Ballston Spa, N.Y. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

Suzanne Balet-Haight is excited. Partly that's just her nature.

But as owner/operator of a flower and landscaping business, Balet Flowers & Design, springtime is her Christmas – and it's finally spring. Also: she is debuting a new Flower & Arts Barn at her nursery. "We built the whole thing over the winter," Balet-Haight says, referring to all accomplishments with the "we" pronoun though she has been the sole proprietor of her business for 28 years.

Even so, she has had some help from her family. "My husband sanded all the floors and my mom is staining wood like crazy," she says describing the days leading up to the barn's grand opening this year on Earth Day, April 22.

For the Balets, and now the Balet-Haights, it's been a family affair all along. Balet-Haight and her brother John grew up in the Malta house next to the farm, where their parents, Peter and Marie, still live. As kids they sold their parents' vegetables at the Saratoga Farmers Market. Balet-Haight's journey took her to college, two years at SUNY Cobleskill, then on to Cornell University's agriculture school where she graduated with a degree in ornamental horticulture. After honing her real-world skills with a few internships and entry-level jobs downstate and in Florida, Balet-Haight found her way back to Malta and in 1995 officially took over her parents' farm. "I expanded it from primarily produce to flowers and landscaping, too," she said.

Balet-Haight is known as an exceptionally talented landscaper, often top of the list for those imagining or reimagining their outdoor spaces. She has an eagle-eye for color, line, detail. That skill, plus her infectious sunny demeanor has earned her the respect of her clients and colleagues. "I've had the pleasure of working with Suzanne for many years," said Saratoga Springs architect John Muse. "Her work ethic is so impressive and evident in the passion and dedication that she brings to each project. My focus as an architect is on the site and context and Suzanne brings the same aesthetic to landscape design."

On the farm, the new Flower & Arts Barn is set next to the greenhouse and high tunnel that have been the mainstays on the Nelson Avenue Extension farm. It's a two-story building with plenty of expanded retail space up front and workspace in the back where Balet-Haight can spread out. "I love teaching," she said, ticking off some of the classes she plans to hold there: hydrangea wreath design, soap making and growing techniques for succulents and airplants. Having a dedicated production space also gives Balet-Haight and her team ample room for flower arranging and corsage production. "I can meet with a bride to design her wedding flowers, upstairs in my new office," she said. "My office used to basically be in my car."



Owner Suzanne Haight waters flowers in a greenhouse at Balet Flowers & Design on Wednesday, March 22, 2023 in Ballston Spa, N.Y. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

Light is everywhere in the new barn. "We designed it to have the rustic feel of everything I love," Balet-Haight said. "Lots of wood and black metal." Balet-Haight is a creative person, so it's no surprise that she enjoyed designing the new space and watching it come alive. In the winters,

when growing season takes a break, she likes to throw pots. “Dark days can be hard for me,” she said. “But getting my hands in the clay is like getting them in the dirt. Both give me joy.” She moved her pottery studio from her home basement to the workspace in the new barn.

The Barn gives Balet-Haight a showcase for her pottery (and photography), as well as expanded shelf space for locally made handcrafts by others: bird houses, succulent boxes, cutting boards, and the like, much of it created by family and staff. She’s also expanding her offerings to nature-inspired games like Bird Bingo, craft sets (Sea Glass Jewelry Kit), wellness products (Yoga Dice), and books (The Edible Flower). “Being outside for any reason, including gardening, is great for your soul,” Balet-Haight said, explaining that she wants to nurture those desires.

The barn also serves as the checkout and store for the items she has always sold: hanging plants, young shrubs and trees, flowers, herbs, and vegetables in starter pots, seeds, gardening tools, containers, soil. “We’ve grown from a 10-by-20-foot shack my dad built me to this brand new, two-story, high-beamed barn,” she said. With on-farm sales a sizable portion of her income, she hopes the new barn will drive more traffic to the farm. “We’ve always been a kind of hidden gem of Malta.”

Balet-Haight’s “we” habit extends to her employees, certainly, and especially to her family. Her husband of 21 years, David Haight, is her champion and mentor, guiding her plans for growth at key points in her business’s development. He’s a planner at American Farmland Trust, “a critical thinker,” Balet-Haight said. “His insights, ideas, and making me think in different ways have been incredibly helpful.” Her parents are ever-present, practically helpful and cheerful. She and her husband have raised their two children just down the road. “How lucky can I be?” she said with complete sincerity.

Daughter Julia, a high school senior, now works the Balet stand at the Saturday Farmers Market. Her son, Andrew, a freshman at Cornell, works his summers on her landscape crew. Does she hope that they take over the business for generation three someday? "Yes, if it's what they want to do," she said. "Right now, they need to find themselves and what they're passionate about." Chances are, if they've gotten anything from their mom, they'll be plenty passionate.