

a colourful crown

A story of beautiful flowers, Banks Peninsula, and a determined young woman.

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Hidden over the hill at Barrys Bay on Banks Peninsula is a cluster of Protea farms growing the ever popular Protea flowers, along with plants from the wider Protea family, such as *Leucadendron*, *Leucospermum*, *Banksia* and *Waratah*. Once booming, many have been let go after the original growers reached retirement, having no 'young blood' to pass the reins on to. That was until Jessica Cooke came along.

Today, her flower stalls are a common sight at many markets around Christchurch and Canterbury, offering cut flowers, foliage and potted plants direct. I sit down with Jessica at the Ohoka Market on a bustling Friday morning to find out more about the person behind this successful flower business.

Jessica grew up amongst the Protea farms on Banks Peninsula, her parents having been one of the first to make the conversion from vegetable farming to Protea growing. It all began after a 'particularly bad courgette season', where the few existing Protea plants on the farm were sold to help top up their income that year. To their surprise, the flowers did better than the vegetables. Their courage to convert inspired others in the area to follow suit.

Having not taken much of an interest in the flowers before, at the age of 24 she found herself helping her mum out on the farm after coming to a loose end workwise. It wasn't long until she caught the flower-growing bug, and her future started to unfold in front of her.

Taking the helm from her mum a few years later, Jessica dove headfirst into running her own business. The first few years were hard. She started selling at markets to add an additional revenue stream to her wholesaling. But this meant she was working all the time – picking, sorting, selling, maintenance – a cycle of work that wasn't sustainable. After a friend kindly pointed out she was 'running herself into the ground', Jessica realised her workload was taking its toll on her mental wellbeing; something close to home after losing her father to suicide when she was a child. The isolation she found herself in, and the large amounts of time she was spending on her own, gave way to the decision to bring in some help to ease the pressure.

She hired permanent staff to take over the market selling, and hires seasonal pickers as needed. The extra time that hiring staff freed up meant Jessica could focus on getting



Jessica Cooke,
the woman behind
Peninsula Flowers.



Jessica is always ready to diversify, taking up new opportunities as they arise, and using every part of the plant and flowers.



TOP / Fresh cut Protea and *Leucospermum* at several markets around Christchurch. ABOVE / The coveted King Protea. LEFT / Jessica can still be found at the odd market, sharing her extensive knowledge with her customers.

some balance in her life. It gave her the opportunity to do more long-term planning for her business – in particular, cultivating and planting more plants to ensure a steady flow of flowers in the coming years. ‘Replanting is an important part of the business as Proteas have an optimal flowering lifespan of 15 years,’ and with a plant taking five years to reach a pickable size, she needs to be continuously bringing on new plants.

Jessica also gets to spend more time at the farm maintaining plants, fine-tuning her pruning skills to achieve optimum yield and the desirable straight stems. There is a passion for her farm to be as environmentally friendly as possible. She takes steps each year to reduce the amount of spray and chemicals used, while finding alternative ways to

deal with the inevitable pests. Not an easy decision in an industry where using chemicals generally equals bigger yields and therefore more money.

I can see one of the reasons Jessica is succeeding: she’s always learning and improving her understanding of the many aspects of her business. She’s not afraid to ask, seeking out experts in areas she needs help in, soaking up all they have to offer her. She tells me her confidence and belief in herself has grown dramatically over the years. She used to be a lot more reserved at asking for advice or help. Now she gets right in there, not worrying about what people might think of her.

A second factor contributing to her success is she’s always ready to diversify, taking up new opportunities as they arise,

Tending to a
Leucadendron
with the stunning
backdrop of
Barrys Bay.



Jessica and her team now offer rustic wedding bouquets and corsages for customers who are wanting something a little more earthy and a lot less expensive.

and using every part of the plant and flowers. Her latest addition is bridal party flowers. She makes them from the shorter stemmed flowers that aren't long enough to sell individually, but perfect for bouquets. After getting many requests, Jessica began to see a gap in the market for low-cost bridal flowers. She and her team now offer rustic wedding bouquets and corsages for customers who are wanting something a little more earthy and a lot less expensive. There are also plans in the pipeline to open her much-loved nursery to the public.

The long-term plan for her business is to get it to a place where it mostly runs itself and doesn't need her hands-on attention every day. Her dream is to spend more time doing other things she loves. One being travel, especially to places where her beloved plants come from, like South Africa and Australia. The second is to spend time helping other young

people starting out in the flower growing industry, sharing her knowledge, experience, and in particular, guidance on keeping good mental health.

It's clear after a morning with Jessica that she's not short on vision or motivation. She is a dynamic woman, with tons of energy and a genuine warmth that came bounding out the second I met her. It isn't hard to see why she is making a success of her business. I walk away from our meeting feeling inspired and energised, as if some of her sparkle rubbed off a little. There's also a sense that this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of what this woman is going to achieve with her life. My money's on her as the 'one to watch'. ●

You can find Jessica's beautiful flowers at any of these weekly markets - Ohoka, Opawa, Riccarton Rotary Market, Lyttelton and Riccarton Bush or get in touch via [facebook.com/Peninsulaflowers/](https://www.facebook.com/Peninsulaflowers/)