

The Crazy! Unbelievable! Far-flung! Adventures of . . . a Flower?

In an era of instant gratification, we stop and smell the lilacs.

By KEVIN ALEXANDER | March 8, 2009

This is, indeed, a story about a flower. Several stems of white lilac, to be specific. And how these lilacs, over the course of a couple of days, went from a greenhouse in the Netherlands to a tabletop in Charlestown. Of course, it's more intricate than that -- it's a story about the things that we take for granted and the people who make those things happen. But maybe most remarkably, it's about how these lilacs, which were bunched on a Dutch farm on a Sunday night, made their way through customs at LaGuardia Airport in New York 24 hours later, then were loaded onto a refrigerated truck and driven to Winston's design studio in time to be primped and prepped so that they could grace the table of a socialite's party on Tuesday night.

The story begins on a tiny island on the Hansen farm, owned and operated by Gerard Hansen, whose family has been cultivating such flowers for three generations in Aalsmeer, the Netherlands. The town, 8 miles southwest of Amsterdam, has mild winters, a long growing season, and extremely fertile soil. "There is no better place on earth to grow lilacs," Zoetendaal says before his pragmatic Dutch-ness kicks in. "Or if there is, I don't know about it."

Zoetendaal grew up in Aalsmeer, the son of a rose farmer who was one of 16 kids born to two strawberry growers. After several years studying, including writing a master's thesis titled "The Complete Guide to All Aspects of Rose Growing," Zoetendaal spent two decades as a sales rep for the Dutch flower buyer De Boer. That's how he met David Winston, who, with his two brothers, owns the Boston area's Winston Flowers shops. On one of his trips to the States, Zoetendaal met Lisa Badessa, the woman who would become his wife. She was then managing the Boylston Street branch of Winston Flowers. They married in 2002, quit their jobs, and briefly ran their own flower shop in New Hampshire before David Winston hired Zoetendaal to oversee the buying for all of the Winston stores. "Back then, David was doing everything himself -- all the buying, traveling, et cetera," Zoetendaal says. "And we just realized that we both cared and knew so much about the industry - - we trusted each other's judgment. It just seemed like a good fit."

The lilacs that bloom in New England each spring aren't grown the same way as the commercially produced lilacs of the Netherlands. To maximize output, Dutch farmers cultivate each bush for seven years, strengthening its branches with constant pruning until it's a compact shrub with numerous stems. At that point, farmers cut the stems, bunch them, and sell them, while the bush is given a year of rest before it's expected to produce another round of blooms. If properly trimmed and cared for, a lilac shrub can give flowers for a hundred years. "We know grandfathers who planted the same shrub that their grandchildren are utilizing today," says Zoetendaal.

The lilac is a forcing shrub -- it can be made to produce flowers ahead of its natural season. And that can be profitable. But it's not accomplished without meticulous, extensive planning. Six months prior to shipping, Gerard Hansen paddles a large, green flat-bottom boat across his lake to one of several man-made islands, lush with small lilac bushes. He pulls the bushes from the ground -- roots, dirt and all -- and transports them to another, more shaded island, where he covers them with reeds or puts them in a dark shed to mimic winter. This tricks the lilacs into shedding their leaves and advancing through the seasons, forcing them into a hibernation period of sorts. After that, he fetches the lilac bushes and lines them up in a greenhouse, where they're kept upright on a dirt floor, their roots packed with soil from the island where they're grown. The greenhouse is heated to 110 degrees to simulate an entire spring season in two weeks, allowing the shrub's buds to swell but not bloom. (Ideally, a lilac stem won't flower until it arrives at its final destination-- in this case, the Winston Flowers studio.) Then every two weeks, the lilacs will be transferred to a greenhouse with a slightly lower temperature until they're needed at market. The night before the lilacs are to be sold, Hansen will cut each shrub's stems, bunch them in groups of 10, and slip them into cellophane sleeves to protect the buds. The lilac bushes are then transferred to one of the islands, where they are replanted in the soil until the next harvest.

It was this journey that our white lilacs were on when they were called to the Aalsmeer Flower Auction in the Netherlands one Monday in December -- the same week that I found myself standing with Zoetendaal in Winston's Boston warehouse, and the same week that a Charlestown homeowner was throwing a party with the distinct request for a fragrant lilac centerpiece.

The Guinness Book of Records calls the 16 million-square-foot Aalsmeer auction house the largest commercial building in the world. The auction house goes through 12 million flower buckets and 800,000 flower boxes a year. This particular day, our lilac stems sit in a bunch with their companions, coolly drinking a mixture of plant food and water in a specially designed square bucket, as Winston's buyer Burt Groeneveld surveys the day's offerings. He's checking for ripeness, looking for consistent long stems (32 to 36 inches is great), and examining each stem's four heads, or offshoots, for clusters of plump buds. He knows

that he will buy the lilacs from Hansen's farm -- he always does -- but market prices fluctuate depending on demand. The auction starts at noon, and as the seconds pass, the price declines. Groeneveld waits until the price is right, typically around 4 to 5 euros per stem in winter (\$5 to \$6), and then he pushes a button indicating that he's ready to place his order. Our lilacs are then immediately transported to KLM Royal Dutch Airline's temperature-controlled cargo facility, which sits in the auction house.

Dutch hegemony in the world flower market is not limited to growing; KLM dominates the shipping side by being the first airline to nail the logistics most vital to flower travel: keeping temperatures uniform and moving really, really fast. On average, KLM ships about 10,000 pounds of flowers to the United States every day in the cargo holds of passenger flights and on cargo planes, says Zoetendaal. In times of extreme demand -- like Mother's Day or Valentine's -- KLM calls in additional cargo planes, which can transport up to 100 tons of flowers across the ocean.

Of Winston's 200 or so employees, 140 work in the warehouse design studio. The cavernous building is like an airport hangar, a garden supply store, and a storehouse for props (a huge toy soldier, a wall made entirely of stacked birch) all in one. On one side is a mass of cubicles housing accountants, administrative workers, employees answering requests for flowers in Winston's 1-800 call center, and -- in a set of large but Spartanly decorated offices -- the Winston brothers. In the cafeteria, there are vending machines, beautiful wood tables, and flowers, which are stored in the cafeteria when there's no more room elsewhere. Clippings from Boston gossip columns posted on a wall detail the (Winston) flowers Ray Allen presented to his wife at a Celtics game.

Zoetendaal and I are standing in one of the delivery rooms looking at long, rectangular pink boxes labeled "Florent Stepman White: Product of Holland." Zoetendaal chooses a box, opens it up, and pulls out a stem of lilac. An assistant uses a Swiss Army knife to make what they call the long cut, a whittling slice along the side of the stem that allows the flower to quickly replenish itself with water. "Most people just cut the bottom off of a lilac," Zoetendaal says in disapproval. He picks up the flower. Pointing to the pulpy stuff in the middle, he says, "See how much more surface area the lilac has to drink?" I nod. "Good then," he responds, laughing, and places the lilac in a bucket filled with plastic tubes connected to a Dosatron Injector -- a yellow panel that regulates the distribution of flower food into the water in which the lilacs will sit.

"The main killer of flowers is bacteria growing at the base," Zoetendaal says, nodding at the industrial washing machine next to the Dosatron. "So we're very careful to sterilize everything." He picks up the lilac bucket and places it on the table, then turns around to face me. "The flower was asleep, which was good, because the stress of travel can be tough." He could easily be talking about his wife. He beckons me out of the room. "Now we need to let it calm down."

Not unlike a dehydrated and jet-lagged passenger, the lilacs finally recover from their intercontinental trip around 2:30 p.m. Tuesday and are ready to be incorporated into the centerpiece for the party in Charlestown that evening. Ryan Zoeller -- who formerly designed high-end interiors -- has been tasked with the arrangement. He's a good-looking guy with a shaved head and the distracted air of someone who's perpetually got more than one thing on his plate. But his easygoing manner and his ability to satisfy even the fussiest clients' vague desires have earned him cachet among a number of upscale clients -- none of whom I could persuade him to speak about on the record. "That," he says, smiling, "is part of the reason you sign confidentiality agreements."

As he's looking for the vase he wants to use, we go back farther into the warehouse, past gigantic nutcrackers, outdoor furniture, and shelves housing containers specifically labeled for many of Boston's elite hotels (Four Seasons and the Ritz, among others). "We need to keep a huge variety of these containers, because each specific hotel has its own look, which can't be anything like any of the others," Zoeller says. "Plus, we like to change them all the time."

In a 5,000-square-foot room in the back is an area cordoned off with lattice. This is where the more expensive containers are kept. There are hundreds of shapes and sizes -- simple cylinders, glass cubes, beakers. Finally, Zoeller sees what he's looking for. "This particular client I know well," he says, "so I have a very good idea of what she wants. But if I don't, I have the salespeople do some digging: How is the house decorated? What sort of flowers don't you like?" Tonight our lilacs will be used for a cocktail party rather than a dinner party, so Zoeller, whose client is paying about \$300 for the arrangement, says he can do something a little more fun, a little more festive.

As Ludacris plays in the background, Zoeller sets out his materials (a tangle of lilac root, sand, flower bulbs, orchids, our lilacs, and three lily bowls) and gets a visit from Francoise Semeria. Semeria is technically a consultant, a Parisian who opened flower stores (until she didn't want to do that anymore, sold them and moved to Nice and then to Boston). But she's more of a stylish muse for the designers, with her fashionable glasses and -- as Zoeller describes it -- "magical accent." Semeria informs me grandly that what Zoeller is about to make is a design that celebrates the different seasons of life.

"This is going to all be about texture and contrast," she says as Zoeller makes even bigger cuts into the lilacs and places them in one of the bowls. He stacks that bowl on top of another, which is lined with black sand; a third bowl, filled with bulbs, is meant to sit next to the stacked creation. "First we have cleaned lilac root, because it represents the start of life; next we have

black sand, because it represents winter and darkness; and then we have the flower bulbs, because they represent the renewal."

"And, of course, the lilac," Zoeller says, smirking, as he places the root around the flowers. "Of course!" Semeria yells triumphantly. "That is the most important part of all!"

"Whoa," I say out loud. "This is serious. I didn't realize so much thought went into this stuff."

Semeria shoots me a look as if I had just kicked her in her fashionably swaddled shin. "What did you expect, huh? That we would just take the flower and put it in the vase, and that would be it?" The truth was yes, that was exactly what I thought, but I kept my mouth shut.

For the next 15 minutes Semeria stands back, staring at Zoeller's arrangement, making cryptic French-accented comments. Finally, the design is done. It looks spectacularly artistic: bulbous lily bowls filled with different textures, colors, and, of course, lilacs.

"It's ready," Zoeller says.

"Are you sure?" Semeria asks. He looks at her. She looks at him. They look at the design. "Yes," she says, answering her own question.

Zoeller and I drive to the client's house in Charlestown. We pull up to a gorgeous, airy Colonial. There is a valet. Zoeller gets the gussied-up lilac out of the van. It is nearly 4:30 p.m., and I feel an odd paternal sense that we are dropping the lilac off at its first prom.

We ring the bell and are greeted at the door by the client. "Oh, my God," she says, glancing down at Zoeller's design. "Ryan, you have outdone yourself!" She walks us into the dining room, where a lone table sits. Zoeller places his design down as if putting a newborn to bed. He spends a few minutes arranging it in several imperceptible ways. He lights four candles around the piece.

"At first," the client says, "I was thinking of using this table space for a cheese platter, maybe." She's silent, thinking. "Maybe I'll still do that," she mumbles, mostly to herself, trapped in the pre-party hostess train of thought.

Zoeller steps back from the table, and we all look at the lilac. "No," he says quietly. "It's perfect as is." ^a

Kevin Alexander is the Boston editor of Thrillist.com. Send comments to magazine@globe.com. ■