



the accidental florist

How poet and philosopher Syrus Paktinat has become one of Westport's favorite floral designers

BY DIANE DI COSTANZO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHICHI UBINA

Along the fast-paced Post Road in Westport and nestled between a big gas station and an office building rests a quiet oasis: a tiny, vine-covered cottage. With its carpet of wildflowers and magical, though slightly shabby, appearance, one half expects to see the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins himself emerge from it.

In fact, it is Syrus Paktinat who comes out to tend the garden. An engaging man with a sweep of silver hair, Syrus opened The Flower Fall thirteen years ago. Although he claims to have known nothing about running a flower shop when he started, Syrus is now one of Westport's most celebrated floral designers. Martha Stewart featured an arrangement he made for New Year's Eve on her show. He is booked all summer for weddings and parties, with fall weekends filling up fast. And as the weekend approaches, clients stream from the shop carrying huge, paper-wrapped parcels from Syrus' selection. Depending on the season, the arrangements range from the traditional — darkly gorgeous Ecuadorian roses and butter-yellow French tulips — to the unconventional — tall meadow grasses and snowy bunches of cotton balls still on branches.

"The flowers he brings from the markets are incredible. He sells the rarest and the finest. But he also has odd and wonderful things like quince and pomegranate on the branch," says Edie van Breems, a Fairfield resident and Flower Fall regular, who relies on Syrus to supply her with the materials she uses at Eleish van Breems, her Woodbury shop specializing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Swedish antiques. "He can access anything I request, no matter



how weird or out-of-season — brushweed, smokebush, unusual hydrangea varieties."

Twice a week, Syrus makes his 4 a.m. forays into New York City to buy flowers. He refuses to place telephone orders, even from the suppliers he knows and trusts. On his trips to the market, he's not so much *shopping* for flowers as he is taking their pulse. "I have to see the flower. I have to get a feeling for its freshness, when and how it's going to open. Is it going to be a lazy thing, opening little by little? Or will it burst with energy, almost dancing in the vase?"

Syrus is famous for making arrangements that hold "a twist, a surprise," says Edie, mixing heirloom roses with brambles or creating a tableau reminiscent of an old master's painting, with vegetables and herbs in the mix. Syrus credits Westport with allowing him the creative license to do extraordinary work.

Using an artist's eye, Syrus Paktinat's approach to flower arranging is visceral. The spring palette includes roses, daffodils, lilies and white birch.

Westport appreciates a diamond in the rough, granting its geniuses a certain amount of leeway, forgiving an unpainted shutter here and there, if greatness lives within.

Syrus has dozens of anecdotes illustrating the gratitude he feels toward his town. He is, first and foremost, an enthusiastic storyteller. His favorite starts with a clump of debris he pulled out of a garden. "I made the motion to throw it into the woods," says Syrus, standing to demonstrate. "And then I looked at it."

It was part of an overblown border bush with a whirling and orange-hued root system. It was the roots that made Syrus pause, clean it off, then invert it, root side up. He arranged it outside the shop in such a way that it looked like a piece of modern sculpture.

"A lady drives up in a Range Rover. She loves the upside-down roots. Loves this thing," Syrus remembers. "'How much?' she asks."

Like an actor on stage, Syrus turns to deliver a sotto voce aside to his audience. »



"I had just taken the lease on the shop. I had no idea how to run it. I had no idea about where to buy flowers. I had no idea what to charge her."

"So I say, 'I have no idea.'"

"And she says, 'How about \$75?'"

Another sweep of Syrus' arm. "This," he says, "is why I love the people of Westport! I am blessed to be here! I am honored to serve them flowers."

Philosopher, Poet and, oh yes, Florist

Raised in the north of Iran, Syrus' earliest memories are of blossoming fruit trees and the family herb garden. As a boy, he was a huge fan of Hollywood movies and "had the dream to come to America." He did, to study theater at Memphis State University, graduating in 1977. Summers were spent with his brother, who had immigrated and settled in Connecticut. After college, Syrus worked in Iran as a filmmaker, only to return to Connecticut in the mid-1980s, when the political situation made an artist's life difficult.

To earn money, and because he loved working outdoors, Syrus hired himself out as a gardener. Then, in 1990, he

noticed that a run-down cottage that once housed a bicycle shop marked by an enormous Fuji sign was for rent. Syrus shakes his head at the thought of that sign; it still stands, thirteen years later. "I must change that," he notes ruefully.

When weather permits, an American flag flies out front, with the shopowner's red Triumph convertible parked alongside it. "Where else in the world could this happen?" Syrus asks. He is a man who expresses near-constant wonderment over the good life he lives in America. "Where else could I have what I have?"

In fact, Syrus is a man who expresses wonderment frequently, most often over the beauty he sees all around him. "You have an expression about this. It is, 'Stop and smell the roses.'" He is quick to give that adage his own spin. "But it doesn't have to be a rose, you know. It could be a dandelion. It could be a grapefruit."

He's well aware that people sometimes forget to smell the roses, even when they've bothered to come into the shop and buy a bunch of them. "We're all in such a hurry," he laments. "Sometimes a client will ask, 'How long will these flowers last?' The answer may be a week. It may be ten days. But what I want to say is this: You put clean water in the vase. You put the flowers in the water. Then you set the flowers on the table. You look at them. And that's

it!" He pauses for emphasis. "Every action has its moment of beauty and that moment — looking at the flowers you've just placed in the vase — is 75 percent of the enjoyment you will get out of them." His voice is quieter now. "If you miss that, you've missed most of what the flowers have to give you."

Dr. Robin Jilton, who was married at Waveny Park in New Canaan last August, chose Syrus to arrange her wedding flowers because she had always admired his philosophical bent. Flower Fall's enchanted quality intrigued her and when she first stopped in to buy flowers four years ago, she found herself falling into a conversation about life and art.

"He's an artist whose medium just happens to be flowers," says Robin, a psychologist who practices in Westport and Irvington, New York. On the day she was due to wed Dr. Peter Nagy, who is also a psychologist, the weather forecast was calling for "torrential thunderstorms and damaging winds," Robin recalls. "It took a long time for us to decide whether we should move the outdoor ceremony inside. So when we finally decided to stay outside, we had very little time to decorate."

Syrus became a storm of spontaneous creativity, draping ivy and borrowing tulle to make streaming bows on the chairs. "It was completely off the cuff," says Robin. "He was fast and flexible. He seemed inspired by the challenge."

Meanwhile, back at The Flower Fall, Syrus is making an arrangement with blueberry branches, cut while young, before the berries take on their plush and purplish aspect — they look as hard and polished as beads, with only a slight bluish cast. These he might mix with ... he's still deciding what. "The first flower invites the second, the second flower, invites the third," he explains his method. What *won't* emerge in the vase is something he's made before. "This is not a traditional flower shop," he allows with a smile. "We never make the same arrangement twice." W

A Few of His Favorite Things



WHITE BIRCH BRANCHES. "Bring them inside, mount them to a kitchen wall and hang bunches of herbs off them," he suggests.

SMALL CENTERPIECES. "They shouldn't be like giants at your table," says Syrus, who prefers a profusion of small flowers, such as pansies or forget-me-nots in low vases.

CUT BRANCHES, FORCED IN WATER. "They look like the bare branches in early spring," he says. "And then they flower. It's like they're bringing news."

WREATHS, YEAR-ROUND. "In spring you can put small pots of planted blossoms in the branches."

WEEDS. Dandelions, Queen Anne's lace, seed pods. "They bring a new shape to an arrangement."