



WE GREW A NEW BUSINESS

These three women tell Emma Elms how they managed to quit their desk jobs to turn their love of plants and flowers into new ways to earn an income



“Working with my daughter to launch our plant business meant we had the expertise and views of two generations”

ISOBEL RAE, 65, lives in Fletching, East Sussex and is married with two grown-up children. She runs the gift website plants4presents.co.uk with her daughter Emily, 34.

THE IDEA I was working as an IT director commuting from Guildford to London, spending hours stuck in traffic jams on the M25. My job was well-paid, but not very satisfying or creative. I'd been writing fact-sheets encouraging people to take up e-commerce when it dawned on me that's what I'd love to do myself. I've always loved giving plants as presents and spotted a gap in the market. There are plenty of ways to buy plants online, but very few websites offer plants as presents. As a gift, it needs to be attractively presented, with a personal greeting card, care instructions, no billing paperwork and it needs to arrive on a certain day.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT I was lucky that my husband Alan, who runs a business consultancy, was able to support us so I could resign from my job to get my project under way. For the first 18 months I was a kept woman until we went into profit! I used my IT skills to build the website and create an efficient ordering and delivery process. My daughter had just finished a season as a wind-surfing instructor. She had a few years' experience in leisure and marketing and was as excited as me about the business so she became our marketing director. We wanted to offer unusual plants that would make original presents, like our Thai Curry Gift Set (with a Kaffir lime tree, a lemon grass plant and a Thai chilli plant, £45) or our G&T Gift Set (a lemon tree with a miniature bottle of Bombay Gin and Fever Tree tonic, £45). Within a week of the website going live we got our first multiple order, someone had ordered three orchids as client gifts. I just thought, "I can't believe it, they must have accidentally duplicated it!" I was so excited I called my daughter and husband over to look at the screen!

In the beginning, admittedly it was very hand-to-mouth. Initially I bought our plants from local garden centres then found a



plant wholesaler who allowed me to place small orders. But soon we had to pre-order so much stock, the plants took over the

whole house – lining the stairs, the bedroom, everywhere! We placed ads with Google and in specialist magazines like the *Royal Horticultural Society* and word spread through recommendation. Often recipients would then become customers.

By that first Christmas, we had so many orders, it was clear we were onto a winner!

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT After two years the business got so big we needed proper premises, so we sold the family home in Guildford and bought a nursery with a house in a village near Lewes. We desperately needed a proper glasshouse and we knew it would be a great investment. All the trucks coming and going with deliveries had started to disturb our neighbours. Once we had the nursery, we could start growing many of the plants on site and we were able to employ people.

WHERE I AM NOW I have six full-time staff and a couple of part-time/seasonal staff. After receiving our Soil Association Certificate, we've expanded into growing organic vegetables, anything from beetroot and aubergine to chard and sweet potato, which my husband sells at a weekly market. He still runs his own consultancy but helps me with the business too.

Our nursery isn't open to the public, we're still a purely mail-order service. As far as I know, we now have the largest range of citrus plants online in the UK and we're constantly coming up with new gift ideas. We have 450 products in our range – many of which we grow ourselves – and

sell 80-100 at any one time. On our first Mother's Day, I remember being so excited going to the post office with 13

boxes, now we dispatch more than 1,300!

GLITCHES When we first moved into the nursery in 2006 we had a snowy winter. To my horror, it cracked over 200 panes on our glass house. Panicking, we got up on the roof, trying to brush

the snow off. For a moment, I thought, "What have we done moving here?" But the winters have never been as bad since.

TIPS With a gift website, remember you're not just selling a product, but also a service. People might order a plant, then call you the next day saying they've changed their mind about the greeting card and want to add another name. You need to provide a good, reliable, friendly service. >>

FIRST YEAR BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

Stock: £1,300
IT software and hosting costs: £1,200
Office equipment: £2,800
Google advertisements: £3,810
Artwork and design: £500





“It took a self-help book to make me realise my love of gardens could be turned into a new career”

JENNIE HERRINGTON, 42, from Berkshire is married with a seven-year-old daughter. She owns The Green Room garden and interior design business.

THE IDEA I'd been working in marketing as a senior account director running a team of five. The job was quite stressful and for a long time I'd known I wanted to start my own business, but I wasn't sure what to do. I'd always loved the outdoors and gardens,

but the turning point came when I read a well-known self-help book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles that posed questions such as, “How do you want to feel when you come home from work in the evening?” By page five I knew with certainty I wanted to go into garden design.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT I handed in my notice and got a part-time job in a nursery to build up my plant knowledge. The salary cut was hard – I was suddenly earning not much over the minimum wage an hour. It put pressure on my

husband as we'd been on fairly equal salaries before, but I knew it was the right thing to do and that made the cutbacks we had to make worthwhile.

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2002
Start-up costs: £9,700 (including course)
Turnover: £80,000
Website: thegreenroomstudios.co.uk

just out of college. By then I'd left the nursery, but while still studying I'd started a basic garden maintenance business a couple of days a week. After a while I launched my garden design business and some of the people whose gardens I looked after commissioned me to do designs. After six months I stopped the maintenance side to purely concentrate on design. My



first job came from a small advert in my local parish magazine but though I tried advertising and leaflets I found word of mouth is still by far the best way to get business – 90 per cent of my clients come from recommendation. I had a good first year with no shortage of work. **BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT** Last summer I won an award for the landscaping of a big development of apartments in Royal Leamington Spa. I was commissioned by a property developer who was behind lots of major luxury developments in the area. He'd been one of my first private clients years earlier when he'd asked me to design his and his wife's garden, so I'd built up a relationship with him over the years.

WHERE I AM NOW By setting regular goals, I've slowly grown the business. I've just employed my first junior designer and we've renovated the house so my office now has space for three to four people. I've also branched into interior design, which has recently accounted for 50 per cent of our business. I work with other professionals like architectural designers and structural engineers. Our philosophy is to try to get clients to see the interior and the garden as one entity, maximising the use of both by planning them together. **GLITCHES** One client living out in the country wanted me to create a deer-

proof garden, but without putting up a fence.

Impossible! I've since learned to be honest from the start if I think a client is being unrealistic.

TIPS Make sure you stay in touch with developments in the market through joining networking groups or just meeting up with local tradesmen such as builders, specialist carpenters or metal-workers.

FIRST YEAR BUSINESS BREAKDOWN

Desk: £100
Computer: £700
Software: £1,000
Drawing board: £200
Stationery: £200
Website: £300
Advertising: £200
Course: £7,000

PHOTOGRAPHS INDIRA FLACK

w&h NEW DIRECTIONS

grew from there. My start-up costs were low: just basic equipment like buckets, vases, cutters, etc and I bought my flowers to order. I decided to specialise in big events like weddings, as although I still love making day-to-day hand-tied bouquets too, they're

not very profitable.

BUSINESS IN FIGURES

Launched: 2008
Start-up costs: £6,830
Turnover: £30,000
Website: emmasousaflowers.com

BREAKTHROUGH MOMENT My first big wedding was in January 2008. I felt so proud and ended up doing 12 weddings that year. **WHERE I AM NOW** I've been going seven years now and I've got some

great loyal customers and I even have a celebrity client – Emma Thompson – who started using me back in 2009. Her PA is a friend of mine so she gave me all these floristry jobs and I didn't realise who they were for at first. In 2013 I did a charity event for Emma at Kenwood House and also decorated her home for Christmas – a real coup for me! I'm sure she could afford the best florist in London, so it felt good knowing she likes what I do. She's a lovely, down-to-earth person and I get the impression she's very supportive of working mums.

I'm a fairly quiet, introverted person, so networking didn't come easily but I've joined the Women in Business Network (WIBN) and when I launched my floristry workshops in April they were full of my networking clients. Now their friends have heard about my courses through social media.

This year is a big year for me. My children are at school so I've got more time to focus on growing the business and I'd like to take on a college graduate to help me. I'm hoping for 25 per cent growth and in five years' time I think we can achieve a £100,-£120,000 turnover.

GLITCHES Working in our garage was miserably cold in winter, then in summer it was boiling hot. When I couldn't bear it,

I'd move all my things into the house. But the mess can soon take over, so last June we completed my new garden studio, which I love. It makes a beautiful space for my floristry workshops.

TIPS Focus on what kind of customer you want to target. Decide if you're going to sign up with Interflora and go for bread-and-butter business or whether you want to be more exclusive and aim for a high-end market. **w&h**

“I started off creating flowers for my sister's wedding, now Emma Thompson is a client”

EMMA SOUSA, 42, is married with three children, aged 12, ten and seven. She lives in North London and runs her own floristry business.

THE IDEA I used to work as a fashion buyer for BHS near London's Marylebone High Street. At lunchtime I'd walk past all the lovely florist shops, telling my friend, “One day I'll leave and open a florist's.” That day came when I was made redundant in 2007. It was a huge shock, as I'd been a buyer for 16 years, but it turned out to be

the best thing that ever happened to me. It forced me to try something new. I was already dabbling in floristry doing an evening course and I'd created the flowers for my sister's wedding a year earlier.

I was in the early stages of pregnancy with my third child when I was made redundant. As a buyer, my hours weren't very family-friendly, so I thought becoming my own boss could allow me a better work/life balance.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT I walked into my local floristry shop and landed a part-time job. I learnt more there than I ever did at college, because it was so hands-on. It felt liberating not being in charge of a big team too. After Louis, my third baby was born, I began working from home in our garage doing a few jobs for friends and family; people recommended me and it

