

## Grape Country Florals Story

Keith and Becky Rife  
Paw Paw, MI

Grape Country Florals had an unlikely beginning over 30 years ago. At the time, Keith Rife was finishing graduate school and trimming grapevines for local Michigan farmers to help pay for college. His mother-in-law approached a local florist and offered that Keith could make grapevine wreaths knowing that he had access to the raw materials.

It was a serendipitous encounter—the florist described in detail the type of wreaths he wanted, set the prices, and placed a \$200 wholesale order for grapevine wreaths before Keith had ever tried to make one. His first attempts at wreath-making in the living room were messy but he quickly got the hang of it and moved the operation to the garage.

For the first few months he supplied a couple of florists with wreaths while he finished school. Realizing the potential to make a little money, he later approached other florists in Michigan and Indiana and began a small wholesale business selling the wreaths he made. The florist who placed the initial order continued to mentor Keith and his wife, Becky, giving them a crash course in floral designing one evening and suggested they try selling their creations at an upcoming arts and crafts show. Encouraged by some initial success, they gradually added craft shows to their schedule while continuing to sell wholesale for the next few years.

In addition, they added a consignment shop in a Chicago suburb to their mix of sales for about 10 years but found it was difficult to maintain inventory for their retail shows and keep the shop owner supplied as well. So eventually they settled into a schedule of about 30 craft shows a year in the mid-western states, March through December. While they never opened a brick and mortar shop, they have been full-time crafters, setting up their “traveling floral shop” over 700 times. Keith continued trimming grapevines in the “off” months for about 15 years.

Being entrepreneurs for the past 31 years has demanded that they continually assess their product and marketing to improve their business. Over the years, floral trends have changed dramatically from simple country designs to more sophisticated arrangements with realistic looking silk flowers and grasses. Keith will still occasionally make a grapevine wreath, but they have incorporated other more contemporary materials into their design repertoire such as wrought iron wall pieces, unique vases and baskets. Wholesale buying trips to the Dallas Gift Mart and AmericasMart Atlanta keep them inspired and abreast of changes in the industry.

Initially they thought they would work the business until grapevine wreath popularity waned at which time they would look for “real” jobs in journalism and natural resources. They never imagined they would make their full-time living selling floral arrangements at craft shows for the next 31 years.