

Take a Bough

Erin Weston's unique magnolia farm proves that money does grow on trees

WRITTEN BY **AMBER KEISTER**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **JONATHAN FREDIN**



Erin Weston grows around 10,000 magnolia trees on 30 acres in suburban Garner. Her hybrid trees yield a distinct foliage, which she crafts into high-end magnolia wreaths, garlands and arrangements. "When people see this, they don't know what it is," she says. "So, if you think about something exotic that you see, there's always something engaging to people."

Ask Erin Weston about success, and she brushes aside the question.

“Part of being a farmer is that it does keep you humble, because Mother Nature is cruel,” she said. “The minute you say you’re an expert or that you’ve made it, you’ve set yourself up for failure.”

On 30 acres of land along N.C. Highway 50 in Garner, Weston grows more than 10,000 magnolia trees and a variety of other exotic evergreens, from which she creates high-end seasonal home décor. The distinctive Weston Farms magnolia wreaths have been lauded in *Architectural Digest*, *Garden & Gun*, *Southern Living* and *House Beautiful* magazines. She ships thousands of yards of garland to hotels across the country, and her clients include floral designers from Raleigh to the White House.

When pressed for a pivotal moment in her farm’s 17-year history, Weston recalls a busy holiday season, about eight years after she launched her business, when her mother was helping take orders.

“I was really desperate to get some help in the office to answer the phones, and the day she was here, Daniel Craig’s assistant called to order some wreaths,” said Weston. “At the end of that day, when she left, she said, ‘I’m really proud of you.’”

“I’m really glad she said that, and it was James Bond who helped move that forward.”

Growth industry

In 2002, Weston inherited the suburban acreage from her uncle, who raised little except minnows and guppies in fish ponds that still dot the property. The Apex native was living in New York, working at a job she

disliked. It seemed like a good time to move back to North Carolina, settle her uncle’s estate and figure out what to do next.

Soon after taking over the property, Weston says she had a “crazy idea” to be a farmer, growing microgreens and herbs to sell at restaurants and farmers markets. Her father, Noel Weston, had recently retired after 30 years as horticulturist for the city of Raleigh, and he served as her adviser. Weston had some initial success, counting chef Ashley Christensen as one of her clients, but she would be out of money by the holidays.

To bridge the financial gap, Weston’s father suggested she cut branches from her grandmother’s prized magnolia tree and sell the arrangements. The seasonal greenery proved popular, with the

continued on page 26



Erin Weston and Matthew O'Connor gather magnolia branches at Weston Farms. “Erin is truly a great designer, creative and visionary,” says O'Connor of his friend. “She can transfer your common living space into a magical, warm and cozy place.”

An arrangement of magnolia leaves, pinecones and pheasant feathers adds warmth to a mantel. All of the components are grown in the U.S., including North Carolina pinecones and feathers from Utah.



Matthew o'Connor

continued from page 24

magnolia garlands and bouquets selling out regularly. She was initially reluctant to create and sell wreaths, but as she says now, if you are a small business owner, you have to listen to your customers.

“People asked for wreaths so many times, I was like, maybe I can make them on my own terms,” Weston said.

She whipped up five experimental wreaths, and sold them all in under an hour for \$75 each. Today, a basic 28-inch wreath sells for \$185, with some of the elaborate wreaths selling for twice that amount.

Appeal of the magnolia

The business may have started with



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Clusters of magnolia leaves and fresh fruit create a distinctive centerpiece for fall entertaining. Once dried, the Weston Farms magnolia leaves retain their color for 10 years or more.

“

Her truly original and family cultivated breed of southern magnolia is one-of-a-kind. This allows her to continually create fresh and beautiful greenery designs that are extraordinarily custom,

— Antoine Ponton,
Raleigh designer

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her grandmother's tree, but the magnolias standing in orderly rows are not your garden-variety *magnolia grandiflora*. Weston and her father worked with plant breeders to perfect the proprietary cultivar and its distinctive leaves — glossy green on one side and velvety brown on the other.

To harvest the precious foliage, which is found only on the 18 to 24 inches of new growth, the tops of the trees are lopped off and the sides are sheared every fall. The aggressive pruning also results in long, straight, vertical stems — perfect for garlands and wreaths.

Raleigh designer Antoine Ponton has collaborated with Weston for nearly three years, and says her unique magnolia displays fit with his business goal to “remember the past and embrace the future.

“Her truly original and family cultivated breed of southern magnolia is one-of-a-kind,” he said. “This allows her to continually create fresh and beautiful greenery designs that are extraordinarily custom.”



Curtis Scott Brown

Friend Matthew O'Connor says the first time he saw Weston's magnolia leaves, he thought they were artificially treated in some way.

"I'm from Long Island, we don't have magnolia up there," he said. "The thick soft chocolate velvet on the back, the sheen of the rich forest green of the leaf, and the beautiful wave and curves of the leaf is what makes it so very unique."

Branching out

O'Connor calls his friend "a great designer, creative and visionary." As an entrepreneur, Weston is always thinking about new products that are rooted in her trees.

Everyone asks for flowers, she says, but the fragrant May-blooming blossoms only last for six hours. To meet this demand, Weston is launching a line of faux magnolia blossoms this month at the High Point Market. She describes her plan for the new product this way: "When faux meets fresh, it all comes to life."

Another recently introduced item was created to make more efficient use of her trees and, like those first wreaths, was inspired by Weston's father.



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Wreaths and arrangements are available with only magnolia leaves or with brightly colored evergreens added in. Erin Weston's father, the former City of Raleigh horticulturist, planted many unusual Asian conifers at Weston Farms, and she uses them frequently with the magnolia.

"My father would walk through the fields every day," she said, describing how he would see piles of small leaf clusters, left on the ground after the larger branches were harvested. "There's a lot of good stuff on the ground," he would say. "You need to design something."

In response, Weston created small bouquets, which sell in sets of eight. The tiny arrangements can be reconfigured in a variety of ways to create different looks, including stacked as a garland, upright in vases, or clustered together as a centerpiece.

"Looking at what you're NOT using is a good idea," she said. "This product was the most popular product — we sold thousands of these last year."

Weston says it was gratifying to be able to share the news with her father, who suffered a stroke in 2017 and passed away earlier this year.

"There were a lot of things that were given to me. That was a gift, having his gifts," she said. "I didn't get the gift of a bunch of cash, but I did get the gift of having a space and having his knowledge." ◀