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Florist Hollie Chambliss Has Unique Touch

By Rena Baer | Photos by Lee Thomas

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For the holidays Hollie Chambliss will be doing more than arranging festive centerpieces. She'll be fashioning pepper-berry wreaths, hanging thick strands of fresh garland, and organizing plump green and white hydrangeas, orchids, lilies, and dried magnolia in the spirit of Christmas.

The Lexington freelance florist is usually an all-flower type of designer, but for the holidays she said she allows a little greenery to sneak in, but only a little.

"Christmas is the only time I use greenery, and it's because I have to," she said. "I think it's much prettier to see flowers."

This season Chambliss will be working closely with interior decorators, caterers, and her own clientele to provide dozens of loyal customers and new clients flowers that bring a modern touch to a traditional holiday.



This holiday wreath contains little greenery yet many flowers — a Chambliss hallmark.

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CHAMBLISS DESIGN PHOTO

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When she gets a job, Chambliss said she goes to the location to get a feel for what she has to work with and then thinks about what kind of feeling she's trying to generate for the occasion. She said she also listens closely to what the customers like and conforms to their style rather than try and impose her own.

The largest chunk of her business — though she does everything a regular florist does — comes from weddings.

"This past summer, brides had me doing all kinds of things I didn't want to do," she said. "It was a learning experience. Everyone has their own style."

Recently, a mother-of-the-bride stopped by Chambliss' house to return some graceful, longneck vases the floral designer had used for the occasion.

"She knew exactly what we wanted and provided a unique touch," said Cynthia York. "It was breathtaking. People went on and on about the flowers. It was a perfect day, and Hollie was a huge part of it."

A customer for the past several years, Lucy Van Meter has nothing but praise for Chambliss' personalized touch.

"When I send my mother flowers, Hollie knows exactly what she likes, and she knows when I send my sister something that she won't take care of it," she said with a laugh.

Van Meter said when she thinks of Chambliss, she thinks of lovely hydrangeas and roses, simple vases and beautiful bows, and of femininity rather than a big show.

"I tell my husband not to buy me any presents, just call Hollie," she said.

Chambliss said some people compare her work to that found in New York, Paris, and other large cosmopolitan cities. She said she tries to bring "energy, intelligence, and emotion" to her work. People can walk into a room and know when she's done the flowers.

Much of her work has Japanese undertones. Her arrangements blend simplicity with grace, her artistry apparent to those who appreciate aesthetics and even to those who do not.

Some of the Eastern influence in her work she attributes to her husband, Art Chambliss, who is half Japanese. The couple went into a design business together after they married. A jeweler and a silversmith by trade, he also had a wide array of decorative skills and an excellent eye for spatial relations. Hollie

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Chambliss said she realized the depth of his skills as they decorated their house together, and he was able to craft pieces that most people would spend thousands of dollars to commission.

"He's extremely talented," she said. "And, we were able to fire off each other."

Recently the two have separated their business interests, and Hollie Chambliss has kept the name Chambliss Design for her floral business.

"I'm trying to take that mundaneness out of life," she said. "What is the purpose of living if you can't enjoy beauty? Life is full of abundance. We need to enjoy it."

Her eye for design is evident in her elegantly decorated home; the pale yellow walls complement the caramel tones of wood-carved furniture her husband crafted from her designs. His original silverwork can be found in many of the home's details. Providing the finishing touch are the orchids she keeps on her dining room table and in her sun-filled kitchen. They are her favorite flowers because of their clean lines and the ease of caring for them.

"I always have flowers in my house," she said. "Always."

"I'm the opposite of a photographer who likes the dark, gritty stuff with shadowy images. I see my work as the opposite — I'm letting in the light."

"I express this perspective through my work," she said.

Chambliss considers her creativity an innate gift. From a young age she said she was into expression, starting with the violin in grade school.

"I was always dreaming as a kid," she said. "I still do."

Chambliss started working at Michler's Greenhouses in Lexington in her 20s. She had come to Lexington from Indianapolis to take care of her grandparents for a summer. The middle child of five, she had spent many youthful summers in Lexington with her grandparents, to whom she was very close.

"It was not my plan to stay here, though," she noted.

She had been fumbling around in college, studying music — classical guitar — at Purdue, and it wasn't working out. She said she tried a couple of times to go against the grain that is her artistic nature.

"I tried to be a nurse, but that didn't work out," she said. "I tried accounting and quickly figured out it definitely wasn't for me."



CHAMBLISS DESIGN PHOTO

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— Hollie Chambliss, floral designer



Red roses, white hydrangeas, magnolia leaves, and berries combine in a vibrant and festive centerpiece.

At the same time, she did not want to be a starving artist, and working with flowers seemed to be a way she could make a good living while being able to fulfill her need for expression.

“I’ve always loved flowers,” she said. “My mother loved them; my grandmother loved them; and my grandfather worked in a greenhouse when he was young.”

She stayed in Lexington, and for 20 years worked as a designer at different shops and then went on to become an assistant to a freelance floral designer who worked at people’s homes and businesses. Chambliss said she really enjoyed the job and not having to work under florists’ guidelines.

Now on her own as a freelance florist, she loves the freedom even more.

“I have a strong desire for beauty,” she said. “Aesthetics are really important to me. I want things to be beautiful.”

Harlan resident Sandy Miller, another loyal customer, noticed Chambliss’ work several years ago when she would come to Lexington and visit the boutiques on Clay Avenue. At the time Chambliss had just gone out on her own and would bring arrangements to local shop owners to “advertise” her work.

“I noticed her lovely work in several shops and picked up her card,” said Miller. “I went to her house, and she was so easy to work with. She listened to everything I said and was never in a hurry.”

Miller said she has used Chambliss ever since — for weddings, baby showers, individual arrangements, and for the holidays.

“Every year I send a bouquet to a family in Lexington for Thanksgiving and Christmas,” she said, “and they can’t wait to get it because it’s something they have never seen anyone else do. Her work is just exquisite.” 🍷

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