

GARDENING

JamJar: the florist turning dried English meadow flowers into works of art

By Fiona McCarthy



Pressed botanical specimens set within lightbox by JamJar Flowers, £5,000

HELEN CATHCART

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Sometimes a photograph, no matter how beautiful, can't capture the precious

moments in nature's life cycle. Which is why Melissa Richardson, whose JamJar Flowers have adorned London restaurants such as Sketch in Mayfair and Skye Gyngell's Spring at Somerset House, started to press flowers.

At her exhibition at Thyme – the restored historic Cotswolds manor house and farm turned countryside retreat founded by Caryn Hibbert – Richardson and her co-director, Amy Fielding, are showing an array of bold, pressed floral artworks on white or black backgrounds, each featuring a variety of meadow flowers sourced from Thyme's 150 acres of ancient water meadows. Some use delicately arranged heads, stems and leaves of violets, poppies, and snake's-head and pointed-petal acmopetala fritillaries; others,

lacy patterns of Orlaya juxtaposed with the graphic shapes of ground ivy, ferns and sedge grasses.

For Richardson, it's the iridescence of buttercups and marsh marigolds that "really boom across the room at you. People think an exhibition of pressed flowers is going to be quite dull, but then they come in and they're wowed by the scale and the beauty of them."

The florist, who is inspired by the garden and woods of her childhood home in Sussex, says that there is "also something so special about pressing flowers and then showing them in the place where you press them. Thyme was very inspiring because the water meadows have never been cultivated or disturbed – to be able to find and press marsh marigolds in April and then hang them in the barn in their correct setting was thrilling."

Despite the scarcity of flowers at the time of picking during the early spring, Richardson embraced the fact that "we weren't going into a garden rich with flowers". Instead, she enjoyed finding a dog violet or wood anemone or, on occasion, being allowed to pick an entire plant with its roots intact, "which makes for a very exciting botanical pressing when you can show the whole plant".

One particularly dramatic feature of the exhibition is a lightbox lined with flowers, pressed between one frosted and one clear piece of Perspex, which, when lit gently from behind, looks like a stained-glass window. "I love the way the light comes through petals, showing the plant almost like a skeleton, as if putting it under a microscope where you can gaze right into the structure of the plant," Richardson says. "It's very beautiful."

Preserving flowers is hardly new, as Richardson points out: "They found floral collars, made of olive leaves, cornflowers [a symbol of rebirth] and poppies in the embalming cache of Tutankhamun." What she has done is "to try to reinvent the idea of pressed flowers by creating something really crisp and modern – from the way we use a lot of space around the specimens, usually working with only one specimen at a time, to the way we frame them".

Although the exhibition is groundbreaking – combining dried-flower arrangements alongside giant oversized prints on Gesso aluminium by the Madrid-based company Factum Arte – JamJar is not alone in using dried flowers in innovative ways. Kitten Grayson is sought-after for her “everlasting installations”, which might mix dried hydrangeas and asparagus fern with foraged twigs and branches for hotels such as Heckfield Place in Hampshire. The artist Rebecca Louise Law regularly conjures large-scale, site-specific scenes and natural weaves from dried flowers for exhibitions in spaces such as the Garden Museum in London and, more recently, Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park in Warwickshire. Carolyn Dunster, a botanical stylist, has just published *Cut Dry: The Modern Guide to Dried Flowers from Growing to Styling*. For the first time at the Chelsea Flower Show this month, JamJar will be creating an installation at the Bull Ring Gate, reflecting the diversity of migratory birds such as reed warblers from sub-Saharan Africa that summer in English meadows, alongside bugs and insects, reeds and plants harvested from Thyme.

Although Richardson will never stop working with fresh flowers, there is something “evocative about a pressed flower in the way it preserves tender memories”, she says. “The minute you cut a flower, it’s already dying, but by pressing it, you’re able to preserve its life greatly beyond its normal expectations. It’s still transient and, over time, it will continue to fade and change, but it will never lose its beautiful structure and that’s what I love.”

The Nature of Thyme at the Tithe Barn, Gloucestershire, runs to September

12, thyme.co.uk; jamjarflowers.co.uk