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Lifestyle Magazine

FEBRUARY 2009



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Say it with silk

Dawn Smith in her Claygate shop

Preserving flowers is like trying to bottle the wind. Unless, of course, they are made of silk. Helene Parry sniffs out the Claygate shop where glorious, durable imitations have become a flourishing concern

Think of artificial flowers, and it probably conjures images of gaudy plastic clusters on Nan's sideboard, routinely ignored by every passing bee. Times, however, have changed. Today's faux flowers are the first floral choice of a host of interior designers; a fashionable adornment for many an exclusive business and home.

And right at the heart of this cultural shift is RTfact of Claygate, designer and supplier of high quality artificial flowers to individual and corporate clients. Bouquets, arrangements, trees: everything a fresh flower florist would stock is here. But, as the RTfact website proudly declares: "The beauty is - it's silk."

"I spotted a gap in the market and went for it," explains Dawn, a qualified florist who lives in Guildford. "I realised that, by combining the finest quality stems with modern design techniques, I could create the kind of lovely artificial arrangements which had never been available before."

"Artificial flowers are far more realistic these days. What's more, they last for years. Think how much you'd spend on a weekly bowl of fresh tulips for your home. A silk flower arrangement soon pays for itself."

It's a serendipitous discovery by a designer with a richly diverse portfolio.

"I've worked on clothes, interiors, every aspect of design," says Dawn. "But I have a real passion for flowers, so eight years ago I did an NVQ in floristry and then worked part-time as a florist."

Yet the highly competitive fresh flower market proved less than fertile soil. So much so that when Dawn encountered a supplier offering a high quality artificial alternative, she quickly decided that the future was silk.

"The key requirement of any artificial flower is that it looks and feels like the real thing, so at RTfact we find the very best suppliers. Most of the flowers are made of silk, but some comprise a variety of materials, while others have a special latex coating to give them the right texture. And, unlike many florists' arrangements, every one of ours is bespoke."

Customers can bring in their own vase, or choose from the wide range stocked in the shop. They are also invited to select stems from the flower gallery, before Dawn and her expert florists set to work on the arrangement itself. The team will even make home visits to help clients best position the end result, and a cleaning service is available too.

In addition, RTfact often works with interior designers on newly built homes.

"These properties need to look their best for prospective buyers, but there is usually no one there to maintain displays of fresh flowers. That's when silk arrangements really come into their own."

Nor is RTfact focused solely on flowers for enduring display. Floral occasions are also very much part of the brief.

"We certainly cater for weddings, especially those in more far-flung locations."



It's so much easier to pack silk flowers when you're flying off to get married abroad. We can make the perfect bridal bouquet and a corsage for the mother of the bride to match her outfit - a lovely keepsake of the day.

"We do funerals too. After a cremation, people will bring in a crystal vase with the dates engraved on it, which we then fill with a beautiful arrangement."

And the idea is certainly catching on. Celebrity clients include footballers, actors and newsreaders, while hairdresser Toni & Guy and Champney's Town and City Spa Guildford are among the corporate players to smell the RTfact flowers.

"We get compliments all the time," says Dawn. "We did a big event for Sir Cliff Richard at Hampton Court three years ago. It was awkward, because we weren't allowed in to start work until 4pm, as the palace is still open to the public until then! But afterwards, Sir Cliff's people wrote to congratulate us on all that we'd done."

So, as the Valentine scent fills the air, is the shop already drenched in orders from amorous clients?

"I'm not sure anyone really wants to receive artificial flowers for Valentine's, even if they do last longer!" admits Dawn. "But we do well at Easter and Mothers Day. And Christmas is very busy too. We supply trees, garlands, the whole package."

The flowers may be artificial, but there is no doubt at all that this business is the real thing.

■ Arrangements start at £5.95 for a single silk flower in a pot, rising to over £1,000 for those to be placed in entrance halls. Stems range from 95p to £35.

RTfact, 22 The Parade, Claygate, Surrey. Tel: (01372) 470580. Visit: www.rtfactflowers.co.uk