A FIELD OF OPPORTUNITY

Outcomes and Lessons from the Open Flower Network Project

OPEN FOOD NETWORK CANADA

ABOUT OFN CANADA

Open Food Network Canada is an incorporated, not-for-profit organization. For more than 10 years, we have supported farms, artisans, and community organizations to connect and scale, in order to increase access to food and flowers produced in regenerative and climate-beneficial ways.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support was provided under the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership
Competitive. Innovative. Resilient.

INTRODUCTION

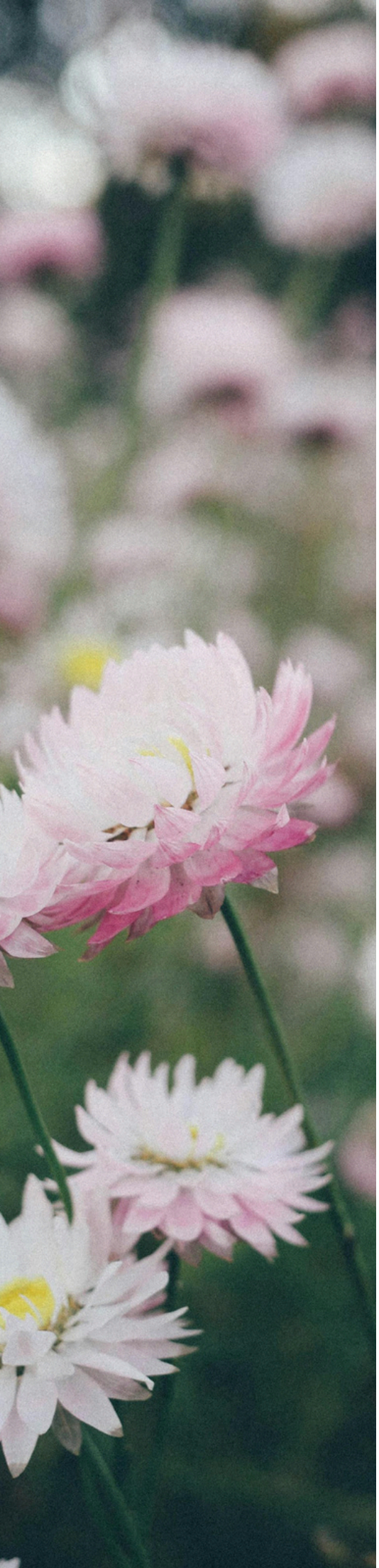
A field of opportunities for women and gender-diverse farmers

The specialty cut flower sector in Canada has seen rapid growth, with much of it led by women and gender-diverse farmers. The sector provides growers with key competitive advantages, such as:

- specialized local niches
- higher profit margins
- value-added products
- a high-demand market that is accessible to farmers with smaller land bases.

The convergence of consumer demand for sustainable, novel varieties and the logistical complexities of global shipping has led to the creation of a valuable market niche for local Canadian flower growers.

Cut flowers such as dahlias, cosmos, and zinnias are now profitably grown by smaller, local farms and specialty growers across the country. These products appeal to high-end markets, boutique florists and event planners, social media-inspired wedding parties, and consumers looking for less traditional flower designs.



Why Open Food Network is going beyond food

The Open Flower Network project was developed in response to the grassroots interest of the many flower farmers and hubs that were already using our ecommerce tools. There has been a proliferation of new flower farms across Canada, and these farms are seeking resources to help them expand their businesses. Despite the sector's growth, little research or programming has focused on this niche or on the success of the women and gender-diverse farmers who are leading it.

With support from the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership, we established the Open Flower Network program to address these needs.

WHAT WE DID

Open Flower Network was designed to help women and gender-diverse farmers connect, scale, and succeed in the specialty cut flower sector.

Over the course of the multi-year initiative, the program included three key activities:

1. Conducting a **gap analysis** to identify characteristics and needs of the sector.
2. Establishing regional leadership and knowledge sharing **networks**.
3. Providing **tools, resources, and guidance** to support farmers' business skills.

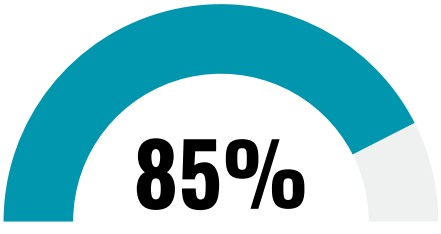
Experts in the field

Throughout the program, our aim was to harness the knowledge and experience of successful farms and co-selling hubs. We collaborated with these sector leaders to develop resources that provide essential insights into the unique challenges and opportunities of specialty cut flower farming. We also gathered data and feedback directly from farmers through two online surveys: a sector-wide gap analysis at the beginning of the program and a program evaluation survey at the end.

IDENTIFYING GAPS

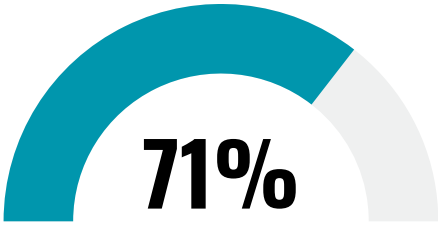
The first phase of the project focused on understanding farmers' experiences in the sector. Between February and April 2024, we conducted a gap analysis survey that gathered responses from 200 Canadian specialty cut flower farmers across a range of scales. The survey provided baseline data on the sector's size and characteristics and, combined with insights from a series of focus groups, helped identify key opportunities and barriers to growth. The resulting gap analysis report was shared widely and directly informed the design of the Open Flower Network program.

Collectively, our 200 survey respondents sold between $4.3–$8.8 million in cut flowers annually, representing 12–26% of the country's entire field-grown cut flower market.



85%

of respondents to the gap analysis survey said their business was **run by a female or non-binary owner**



71%

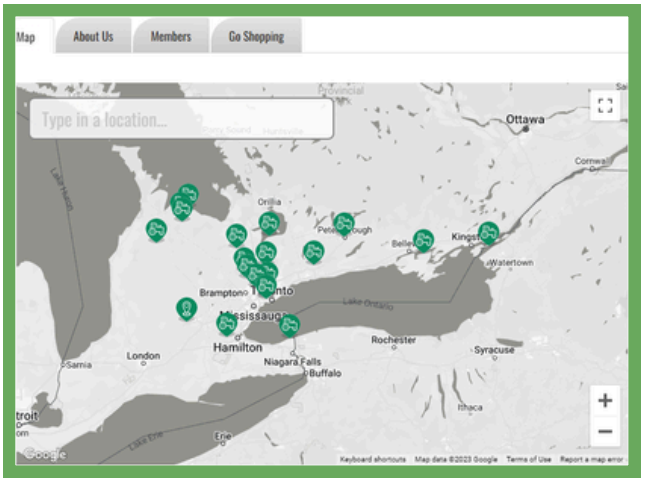
of respondents to the gap analysis survey said they had **plans to expand their operations** that year

Obstacles and opportunities

1. Farms are anticipating growth and optimistic about future conditions.
2. Finding new markets is a priority for farms of all sizes.
3. A large cohort of farms under 1 acre are struggling to build viable businesses.
4. Time management and work-life balance are significant challenges for most farmers.
5. Wholesale sales and flower hubs are underused opportunities for farms of all sizes.

ESTABLISHING NETWORKS

To support both knowledge sharing and co-selling opportunities, establishing networks was a key part of the program. We worked with farms and hubs to build a network of cut flower "leadership hubs," and coordinated the launch of specialty cut flower marketplaces and co-selling projects, connecting rural farms with designers and florists in urban markets.



THE LOCAL FLOWER COLLECTIVE

We established 7 leadership hubs:

- Calgary Flower Growers (AB)
- Cooperative Flower Network (Edmonton, AB)
- The Local Flower Collective (Toronto, ON)
- The Millgrove Flower Hub (ON)
- Grey-Bruce Flower Growers (ON)
- Muskoka Flower Growers (ON)
- Ottawa Flower Collective (ON)

We offered ongoing recruitment and technical support to help these networks build successful online marketplaces on the OFN ecommerce platform. This included helping new and emerging farmers to create profiles on the platform, add product listings, and network together to form and/or expand marketplaces.

We also completed a total of 9 best-practice sharing events for almost 100 participants in BC, Alberta, Ontario, and Canada wide. We developed individual 'year-in-review' dashboard tools for each of our leadership hubs, and used these to guide debriefs on the previous year and strategic planning for next season with each hub.

BUILDING SKILLS

In person and virtual events

Over the course of the program, we held a total of 62 events, both online and in person.

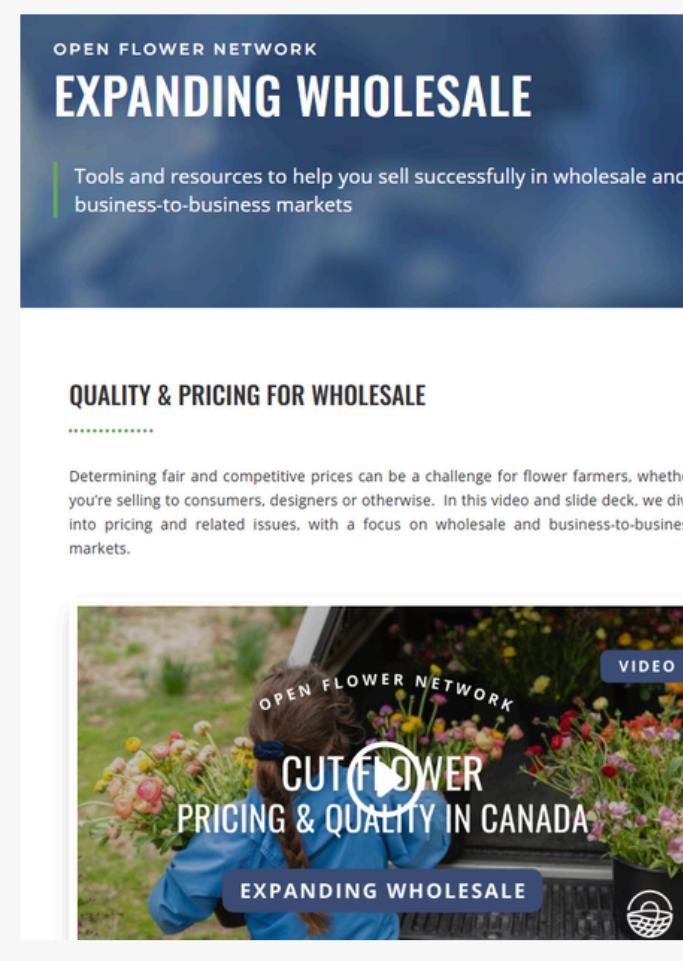
- 18 cross-Canada webinars
- 8 on-farm learning and skill-building days at Garden Party Flower Farm in Ontario
- 5 in-person events co-hosted with leadership hubs in Ontario
- 10 virtual events in Ontario
- 7 virtual events in Quebec
- 3 virtual and 5 in-person events in Alberta
- 4 virtual and 1 in-person events in BC
- 1 presentation at the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers annual convention.

Resource packs

To address obstacles and capitalize on opportunities, we created a set of five online resource packs, focused on priority areas identified in our gap analysis.

1. Starting Up and Scaling
2. Channeling Optimism
3. Expanding Wholesale
4. Putting Flowers on the Map
5. Preventing Burnout

These packs include a mixture of videos, readings, recommended resource lists, and downloadable tools for farmers at every stage in their journey.



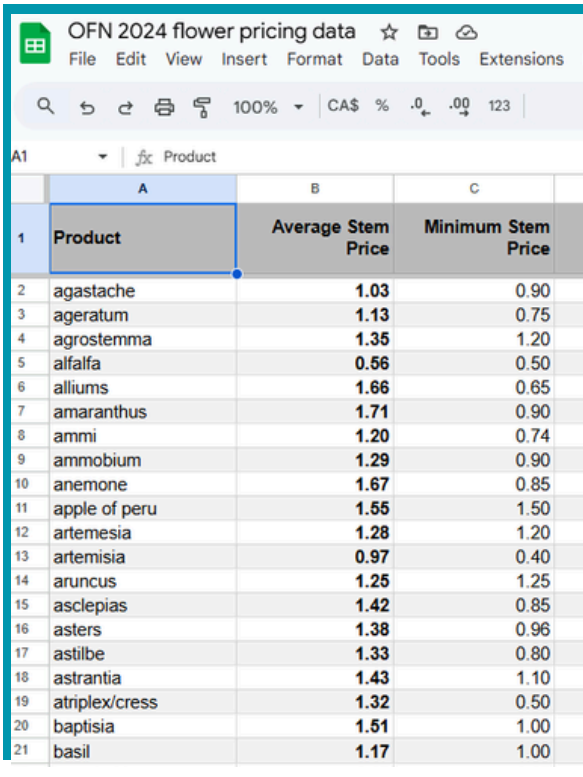
1. STARTING UP AND SCALING

Roughly two-thirds of our survey respondents are operating farms that are under 1 acre in size. This large cohort of early-stage farms needs targeted programming to channel their entrepreneurial enthusiasm effectively, including proven scaling strategies to help 'experimenting' farms that want to make the jump to business viability.

The Starting Up and Scaling resource pack brings together videos, resource lists, and reference materials to help early-stage farmers plan for success. Topics include setting business goals, determining prices, and conducting end-of-season reflection.

2024/2025 Pricing Data for Canadian Growers

We know that pricing is a key issue for new flower farmers. As part of this resource pack, we created a spreadsheet pricing tool, which included a list of the 140 most popular flower products sold through 7 online marketplaces (or 'flower hubs') on the OFN platform in 2024. For each flower type, we included the lowest, highest, and average price per stem, as well as the percentage of total sales that flower type represents. This tool was designed to give specialty cut flower growers an overview of the sector and a starting point for their own pricing. Due to the strong interest of farmers and hubs, we also released an updated version of this tool with 2025 data.


OFN 2024 flower pricing data

File Edit View Insert Format Data Tools Extensions

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A1 Product

	A	B	C
1	Product	Average Stem Price	Minimum Stem Price
2	agastache	1.03	0.90
3	ageratum	1.13	0.75
4	agrostemma	1.35	1.20
5	alfalfa	0.56	0.50
6	alliums	1.66	0.65
7	amaranthus	1.71	0.90
8	ammi	1.20	0.74
9	ammobium	1.29	0.90
10	anemone	1.67	0.85
11	apple of peru	1.55	1.50
12	artemesia	1.28	1.20
13	artemisia	0.97	0.40
14	aruncus	1.25	1.25
15	asclepias	1.42	0.85
16	asters	1.38	0.96
17	astilbe	1.33	0.80
18	astrantia	1.43	1.10
19	atriplex/cress	1.32	0.50
20	baptisia	1.51	1.00
21	basil	1.17	1.00

2. CHANNELING OPTIMISM

Our survey revealed most farmers were optimistic about the sector's business potential, and farms of all sizes had plans to expand capacity. With this widespread positivity, there is a need to coordinate and channel the sector's growth, to prevent gluts, and scale market opportunities effectively.

The Channeling Optimism resource pack helps farmers consider the challenges and opportunities in each of the sector's main sales channels: retail, weddings, and wholesale. Through videos and other resources, growers can gain knowledge and guidance to help them maximize the season and build a successful farm business.

3. EXPANDING WHOLESALE

Data from our gap analysis survey suggest that wholesale sales channels are an untapped source of income for many farms, both scaling up and established. Coordinators of wholesale cut flower marketplaces already using the OFN platform agreed with this, reporting a large unmet demand from event planners and designers for more local floral products.

The Expanding Wholesale resource pack helps flower farmers understand and expand into wholesale markets. Drawing on input from successful wholesale hubs, the pack's videos and other resources provide guidance on quality and pricing, tips for establishing relationships with designers, and a summary of top selling wholesale flowers by season.

4. PUTTING FLOWERS ON THE MAP

With more farmers moving into specialty cut flowers, these farmers need help to find customers and market their businesses effectively, in order for their own growth plans to materialize. With multiple, distinct customer groups in this sector—from event designers to florists to DIY brides—farmers need help identifying the best mix of sales channels, while understanding how to meet the different needs of each buyer group.

The Putting Flowers on the Map resource pack is focused on helping flower farmers reach new markets. Along with marketing materials tailored to the needs of specialty cut flower farmers, the pack also highlights OFN's series of online directories promoting local flower farms.

5. PREVENTING BURNOUT

Finding time and managing life's demands are key difficulties faced by the women and gender-diverse farmers who filled out our gap analysis survey. We can assist farmers with these issues and nurture growth in the sector by curating proven workflow prioritization strategies and building peer-to-peer support networks.

The Preventing Burnout resource pack contains crowd-sourced tips and strategies around goal setting, time management, and marketing, drawn from the experiences of flower farmers across Canada.

ENHANCING DIGITAL TOOLS

Flower growers and hubs have a lot in common with food producers, but they also have some distinct needs when it comes to ecommerce. As part of this project, we worked with flower hubs on the Open Food Network ecommerce platform to understand and address these needs with a number of new or upgraded features.

Helping farmers manage product lists

Flower farmers typically grow numerous varieties and have much larger product catalogues than food producers. With this in mind, we added features to make product list management faster, easier, and more accurate:

- Smart automations for unit types and tax categories
- Product preview and offline product management
- Enhanced tagging and sorting, including hiding out-of-season items
- Automated pick/pack lists sent directly to producers.

Streamlining processes for hub managers

Most hub managers are also farmers or designers, with limited time to manage online marketplaces. We delivered several features to reduce their workload and streamline weekly operations:

- Filterable and mergeable reports that can be downloaded in multiple formats
- A 'Payout Suppliers' report that automatically calculates how much each farmer needs to be paid when the marketplace closes
- Direct order editing enabled for farmers in the hub.

Improving experience for buyers

Hubs experience rapid shopping surges when the market opens, with popular items selling out quickly. Understanding this pattern, we introduced automatic cart updates for sold-out products. This key improvement speeds up checkout, prevents ordering errors, and improves the shopping experience.

RESULTS

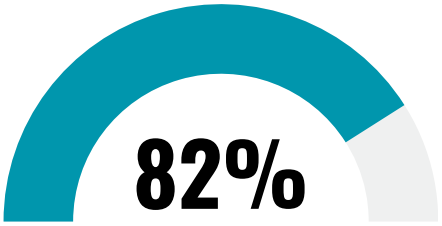
Open Flower Network was a multifaceted program, designed to benefit both individual small-scale farms and the sector as a whole. To measure results, we considered program reach and OFN platform metrics, as well as circulating an online program evaluation survey between December 2025 and January 2026, which was completed by 60 farmers and hub managers who were aware of or accessed the Open Flower Network program. Together, these sources confirmed that the program engaged thousands of people, helped farmers and hubs capitalize on a growing sector, and created lasting resources for the future.

Understanding the sector

Our gap analysis successfully engaged over 200 Canadian specialty cut flower farmers at a range of scales. Their meaningful engagement let us create a gap analysis report that, for the first time, provided baseline data on the sector's size and characteristics, and identified opportunities and barriers to growth. This data was not only essential in guiding the development of the Open Flower Network program, but also in creating a lasting resource for farmers, other organizations, and future projects, which has been viewed over 500 times.

Increasing awareness and access

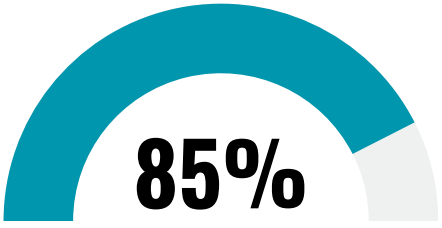
The project helped women and gender-diverse farmers overcome barriers to participation in Canadian agriculture by helping them understand and access opportunities in the rapidly growing specialty cut flower sector.



of respondents to the program evaluation survey said they **felt more optimistic about their farm's financial outlook** as a result of the program

Establishing networks

The project built national directories and networks across flower farms, strengthening the capacity of farmers to navigate an evolving economic landscape and better understand and position themselves in the sector.



of respondents to the program evaluation survey said the program **helped them build relationships with other flower farmers**

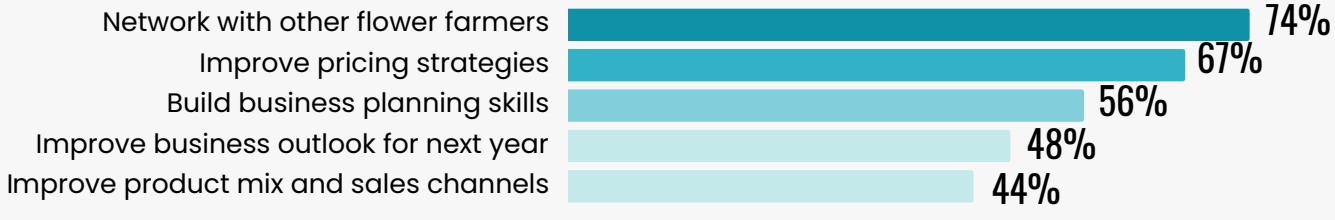
> The diverse resources provided by OFN and the dedicated work Theresa has delivered to our community have been invaluable in supporting and GROWING my business and have also strengthened the local cut flower sector as a whole! Led by Theresa, the sharing of these resources has fostered invaluable relationships with other growers that I am personally very grateful for.
>
> ~ Farmer (2026 program evaluation survey)

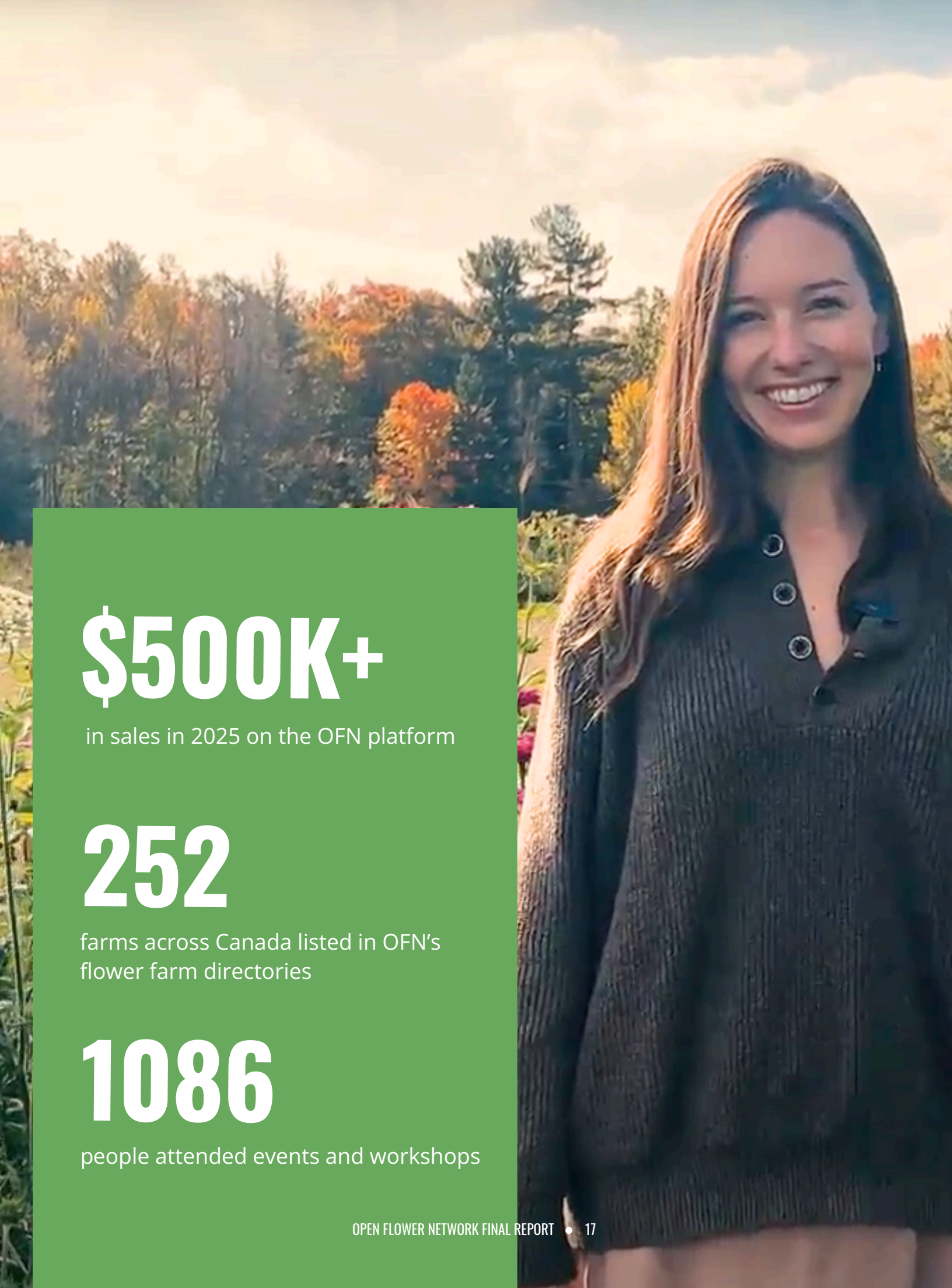
Building skills and knowledge for farmers and hubs

Based on our gap analysis of the sector, we tailored our programming to address the most pressing needs.

- Offered mentoring, skill-building, and knowledge sharing opportunities through online and in-person **events attended by 1086 participants**.
- Created 18 tools and resources, including videos, print resources, and templates. Combined, these **materials have been accessed over 15,000 times,** and continue to be viewed and used regularly at the project's conclusion.
- Provided business intelligence support to farmers and hubs on the OFN platform by compiling and sharing key sales metrics, such as top sellers, top buyers, and pricing per stem. We extended the reach of this knowledge by offering webinars broadly to the sector, and these were **our most popular resources**. These resources have helped new and maturing flower farmers to develop a more strategic product mix and stronger business plans.
- Trained 96 farmers and hubs in the use of digital supply chain tools, which helped them generate **over one million dollars in cut flower sales** over the course of the project.

Respondents to the program evaluation survey reported that Open Flower Network programming had helped them in the following ways over the past year:





$500K+

in sales in 2025 on the OFN platform

252

farms across Canada listed in OFN's flower farm directories

1086

people attended events and workshops

LESSONS LEARNED

The biggest obstacle we encountered (as with many programs targeting farmers) was time. Flexibility in timing, formats, and expectations was imperative.

Engage hubs in the off-season. Hubs are very busy from April through December and can be hard to engage during this time. When possible, it was ideal to concentrate work with them during the off-season, from January to March.

Be flexible with scheduling and delivery methods. Most specialty cut flower farmers are women with young children and busy lives. Meetings with hubs had to be scheduled around school bus times, meal times, and bed times, which was a challenge when we crossed time zones. This often meant holding meetings on Sundays. Along with thoughtful scheduling, providing video recordings and other asynchronous resources was essential to ensure farmers could access the program at times that suited them best.

Allow for authentic networking. While originally we thought each hub would act as its own local 'community,' in the end, they formed one national, networked community. Hubs were very keen to meet with their counterparts in other regions and share solutions to common problems.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Open Flower Network project focused on a number of pressing trends and challenges in the unique niche of specialty cut flowers. With the project's success and the sector's ongoing development, new needs and opportunities have emerged. We see several key next steps to help farmers and the sector continue to thrive.

1 **Attract new buyers.** Throughout the project, we saw growing interest from farmers wanting to join existing hubs or launch new ones, as the benefits became better known. For hubs to thrive, however, grower enthusiasm must be matched with buyer demand. A dedicated marketing effort aimed at designers would be an important next step, especially in regions outside the GTA where there are fewer buyers.

2 **Support multiple sales channels.** Many hubs have expressed interest in expanding beyond wholesale into direct-to-retail sales. They would benefit from support and marketing tools to reach DIY brides and other consumer audiences.

3 **Expand to more regions across Canada.** Most flower hubs so far are located in Ontario and Alberta, but there are many mid-sized cities across the country where hubs could flourish. We have already heard interest from growers in British Columbia, looking ahead to 2027. Focused marketing and connection-building efforts in Manitoba, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada represent promising next steps.

I would love to have this kind of research and development continue for small scale, women flower farmers, of whom there are a lot. We can have a huge impact on agriculture in Canada.

~ Farmer (2026 program evaluation survey)