

Cover Story

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“I Started My Love for Plants at a Very Early Age”

Jennifer Polanz

Chicago-based designer Tu Bloom is no stranger to the camera flashes and glittery sparkle of a glamorous red carpet event. In fact, he just completed his 16th year creating gorgeous floralscapes with PanAmerican Seed's Wave Petunias and Suntory Flowers' Senetti Pericallis and BluOcean Chrysanthemum for the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles (more on that in a bit). But that wasn't always Tu's story—it took a lot of hard work, determination and passion to get to where he is today.

Thai Basil Starts & Mini-Citrus Trees

Tu's story started in South Vietnam, in a region known for producing new varieties and plants. His family emigrated to the U.S. when he was 5 years old, settling in Section 8 housing in Chicago.

“I started my love for plants at a very early age,” Tu recalled. “As far back as I can remember when I was growing up I was propagating Thai basil from stems, rooting them in water with my mom. We were growing miniature citrus under lighting.”

Pictured: Tu Bloom opened his first brick-and-mortar store, Bloom Chicago, on the north side of the city in 2020 to go along with his bustling landscape design business, Tu Bloom Designs.

One of the first books he read in its entirety was a plant encyclopedia, and his mother and grandmother Helen continued to help Tu nurture that passion throughout his life. When they left the apartment and bought their first home, his grandmother and Tu built a lattice together for roses they would grow at the Elmwood Park home that's still there today.

And when Tu went to college at Loyola Chicago for a major in psychology, he still took horticulture classes and created unique bamboo designs in vases and ceramics as a side hustle.

“I would sell them to different restaurants—this was all before the Lucky Bamboo craze where they were in CVS and Walgreens,” he said. “Those blossomed into the floor design centerpieces I've done for Elton John at the



Grammy's."



But first, he graduated and moved on to a master's degree in sociology from DePaul University in Chicago, beginning a trajectory for the corporate world. He never stopped dabbling, though, as he started arranging cut flowers as a hobby and creating special designs for friends. Then, as his corporate career was about to take off, everything came to a halt.

Pictured: Tu on the red carpet at the Grammy Awards with Applause Roses from Suntory Flowers. • The debut of Beacon Impatiens from PanAmerican Seed on the Grammy's red carpet in 2020.

Plants as Salvation

Tu's father went to the hospital for what they thought was pneumonia in late 2005, but was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. He died a month later, washing the family in grief and moving Tu to quickly become the head of the household for his mother and younger sister.

"From that is when I set everything aside in the corporate world," he said. "When all else buckled and gave and fell through on me, when I thought there was no more happiness and love in what I was doing when my father passed away, what did I turn to?"

"Horticulture and gardening."



He began by building a lean-to greenhouse on his mom's garage in the perfect location for plant growth, using old windows and doors he found on Craigslist and other free sites, reinforced with 2x4s and 4x4s. A master woodcrafter neighbor helped him piece it together on a poured concrete slab. He also built a 900-gallon koi pond heated by a garage heater that a friend helped him to install—all of which is still there at his mom's Jefferson Park home.

From there he began actively growing plants, selling to friends and family, then growing a bigger customer base in the wider Chicago area. He began dabbling in small-scale container gardening, designing creations for customers in Chicago's luxurious Gold Coast neighborhood, among many other areas of the city. He launched Tu Bloom Designs to meet the demand for gorgeous cityscapes.

Looking back at it now, he said the plants he worked with made all the difference.

"When all hope is gone, it seems, it's a rebirth—a phoenix from the ashes," he said. "I turned to gardening and it was my salvation. It saved my mother's life, my sister's life."

Growing the Business

Since the mid-2000s, Tu's business has not just bloomed, but exploded. He has put in the long hours and efforts to build a loyal following, not just in his home city of Chicago, but in Los Angeles, Key West, Miami, Atlanta, Portland

and other U.S. cities, as well as Paris and London.

It's a testament to his love of his business and his work ethic that he's been able to build so much demand, both before the pandemic and after. He books out about eight to 12 months in advance, and has a small team of eight to 12 people creating stunning landscape and container designs for customers. But he tries to never take on more than they can accomplish.

"We take on what we can and say, if we can't take on more, than that will be for next year," he said. "That's what keeps my business going; I don't overpromise and underdeliver. This is what we can do and people will wait."

And if that wasn't enough, he opened his first store in 2020 (yes, in 2020) called Chicago Bloom on the north side of the city. The deal for the location started in 2019, and he spent eight months building out the inside of the store. The pandemic hit, and in the beginning, it was more of an operation to help keep people smiling: they shuttled nurses, police, firefighters and other first responders through a two-way garage to offer cut flowers and other gardening accessories provided by companies like Corona, Ball Horticultural Company, Suntory Flowers and Organic Mechanics.

"We did it to keep them smiling while they were battling COVID," he recalled. "That prolonged closure ended up being a blessing in disguise. I could build up the store the way I wanted it and not feel rushed, but it also gave us the opportunity to share flowers and tools with first responders around the city and state. It was amazing to be able to do that."

Once the store opened officially, customers poured in as they looked for happiness through houseplants.

"There were lots of new gardeners, they came out of the woodwork!" Tu said. "Chicago Bloom couldn't keep plants on the shelf."

From a Nicked Orange to a Red Carpet

Many in our industry know Tu has been designing the floralscapes at the Grammy Awards for many years (this year was his 16th and prior to him there were no flowers on the red carpet). But have you heard the story of how it came about?

"I always share this with the younger generation: Always ask for an opportunity because the worst they can say is no," Tu started out the story.

It goes like this: He was creating a landscape design at the Hollywood Hills home of the then president of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences Neil Portnow. Tu had been there for eight hours and didn't relish the thought of leaving the property for food, so he pulled an orange (the only one) off the mineola orange tree.

"I didn't think he was home, I thought 'I hope he doesn't see me.' I tore that orange apart and then he walked around the corner," Tu said, laughing. "He starts cracking up. He walked me around the entire garden, showing me all the other fruit trees."

From that moment, they became friends, and Tu eventually asked him, "Have you ever had anyone do flowers for the actual red carpet for the Grammy's?"

That's how Tu became the first one: he went to find sponsors and companies to work with, and became the official florist of event, starting with the 50th Annual Grammy's in 2008. In the later years, he began working with Delilah Onofrey at Suntory Flowers to showcase the company's unique blue Applause Roses in designs and later the cool-weather-loving Senettis. And then he worked with Claire Josephson at Ball Horticultural Company to include first Beacon Impatiens, then Wave Petunias (both from PanAmerican Seed) on the red carpet.

“Over the years, I always wanted it to be a very attainable project. That’s why we document everything,” he said of his Grammy designs. “They used to be true container gardens with rooted plants, now it’s a hybrid of both. I always choose rooted to go with floral, it makes it so relatable.

“Look at those Senettis; look at how he used Wave as a cut flower. The possibilities are endless in your garden and it all starts with the plants. That’s the foundation and that’s why I keep it true with live plants all the time. It’s really what elevates the design.”

What’s cool is those superstars walking the red carpet? They love the flowers, too, even something as unassuming as impatiens.

“The impatiens from your garden, they got rave reviews!” Tu said. “They were raving about the application and installation we did with the Beacon Impatiens. It was so wild and made me so happy because my ultimate goal is to elevate our platform and bring it to the red carpet.”

What’s Next for Tu?

A couple of months ago he and his family celebrated the first anniversary of his restaurant in La Porte, Indiana, called Bon Viet. It’s a French-Vietnamese restaurant that serves recipes stemming from three generations of Tu’s family, and his project for this year is to launch more locations and look for property where they can (of course) grow more of the crops and herbs they use in the restaurant. Part of the prospect of growing their own food, too, would be to provide access to those in the greater northwest Indiana area to give back to the community.

It’s a long way from the propagating Thai basil in a Chicago apartment, but at the same time, it’s a continuation of the same threadlines that have run throughout Tu’s life: a celebration of culture, family, passion, food and plants.

“I’m so thankful for all the opportunities that I’ve been given. All the puzzle pieces fell into place,” he said of his success. “My mom is my rock and we have a very close relationship. All that I’ve done is to make not only my family proud, but every time I share my story with someone, I see the little glimmer in their eyes of hope. That when all else looks like it’s gone wrong, the storm shall pass and amazing things can happen.”

“You have to be positive and there are people out there like me who have blossomed.” **GP**

The Designs at the 66th Grammy Awards

This year’s designs featured:

- PanAmerican Seed Wave Spreading Petunias, including the E3 Easy Wave in Sky Blue, White and Red
- Suntory Flowers’ new BluOcean Chrysanthemums, Moon Carnations and Senetti Blue Bicolor Improved

Tu made 26 larger arrangements for the red carpet, plus smaller bouquets for the event areas.

