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Jane Packer

Founder of Jane Packer Flowers

When Jane Packer got a call early one Monday morning asking if she could drop everything to meet someone to talk about wedding flowers, she almost said no because she had been working all weekend and was exhausted. However, when the caller insisted, she relented – and went round to discover that the bride-to-be was none other than the Duchess of York.

It was the first time a tiny shop had been chosen over a long-established firm to provide the flowers for a royal wedding and suddenly Packer was front-page news. She says: 'I was coming back from the market one morning when they announced on the radio that a 26-year-old florist had been chosen. By the time I got back to the shop there were six journalists waiting outside.'

Packer first became interested in flowers while still at school when she got a Saturday job in a traditional florist's shop near where she lived in Grays, Essex. She says: 'It started off as a way to earn pocket money, but as soon as I



started working there I got hooked. Nobody really understood why because flower arranging was the kind of thing that old ladies did on a Thursday night.'

After leaving school at the age of 17 she started working in the shop full-time but it was not until she started a floristry course in London that she discovered how creative flowers could be. She says: 'The girls who worked in the London shops would come in with these fabulous bunches of flowers and I would just have a little bunch of chrysanthemums that I'd carried up on the train. It opened up a whole new world for me. In the shop where I worked people only bought flowers for weddings and funerals.'

She moved to London herself and got a job as a florist in a hotel. When she decided to move on after two years at the age of 21, the manager told her that if she ever decided to start up her own floristry business she should come and see him. Three months later she was back, having realised that his offer of help was too good to walk away from. The manager gave her a rent-free workroom in exchange for

doing the hotel's flowers and after securing a £500 overdraft, Packer was in business. She decided that a good place to start getting orders might be the gentlemen's clubs on Pall Mall. But she did not have enough money to print brochures so she decided simply to send them a bouquet instead – and quickly discovered that it was a much more effective way of getting her flowers noticed and getting business.

After a year her flowers were selling so well that Packer moved into her own premises in a former café in the West End, but it was harder work than she had imagined. She says: 'I was very naive. I quickly found that the only way I could afford to pay the rent was by working seven days a week, going to market at 5 am and often working through the night. For the first four years I hardly stepped foot outside the door.' Her mother would travel up from Essex one day a week to help with her accounts.

Having her own place also gave Packer a chance to develop her own style. She says: 'I banned carnations and chrysanthemums from the shop and bought all the country flowers I could find. I used to buy sunflowers from a farmer and would go out to meadows at the weekend and pick wild flowers like stock and cow parsley. I have always thought that one beautiful flower in the right vase says as much as a hundred flowers.'

Her individual style was quickly noticed. Magazine stylists started coming into the shop in search of inspiration and soon she was asked to write a book. Its success prompted so many requests from people to learn about her methods that in 1990 Packer decided the simplest solution would be to open her own floristry school. She and her husband-to-be sold the flat they were living in and bought an old house with a basement which they converted into classrooms. They lived in squalor in the rooms upstairs until they could afford to renovate the rest of the house. It

was a sound move. The school was such a success that within weeks of opening she was approached by a company who wanted to open a Jane Packer school in Japan. Another followed in Korea.

In 1994, however, the company was thrown into crisis after two big clients went into liquidation owing a lot of money. Packer says: 'I didn't know if I could survive this. The bank sent surveyors round to value our house and I was so angry at their callousness. What was so infuriating was that it was through something that was no fault of our own.'

Happily, the company pulled through and now has nine retail outlets including Japan, Korea, New York and the UK, where it supplies flowers for Gordon Ramsay's restaurants. In 2005 Packer also started up a flower delivery service called Jane Packer Delivered, which will deliver flowers next day anywhere in the UK. As a result turnover for 2009 is expected to be £7 million.

Packer, now 49, thinks her success has a lot to do with her positive outlook on life. She says: 'I'm always optimistic. I never stop to think whether something is achievable or not,

Fact File

Date of birth: 22 September 1959

Marital status: married with two children

Highest level of education achieved: secondary school

Qualifications: five CSEs

Interests/hobbies: cooking, reading, theatre and film

Personal philosophy: 'Tomorrow is another day. I am forever optimistic, nothing gets me down for too long.'

I just always think, oh I can do that, it will turn out fine. The only problem is that I can get half way and then discover I have bitten off more than I can chew. I remember trying to make strudel pastry once – I ended up with it stretched all the way around the kitchen.'