



Local farmers till the land of a flower farm in Daijing Village in suburban Shanghai's Jinshan District. — All photos by Wang Yong

center in the future, supported by more convenient financial services, among others.

At the end of last year, the Hongqiao Flower Valley — a major city-level project — broke ground in the village, involving a total investment of 150 million yuan. As part of the project, a 20,000-square-meter flower trade and exhibition center will be built soon.

When I first visited Yangjiazhuang Village on January 31, new steel frames for future greenhouses and certain other buildings were being erected on a large piece of riverside land, separated by a rural boulevard from the current flower greenhouses.

On the spot, I searched my mobile driving map and found I was 15km away from the Hongqiao Railway Station and 13km from the Hongqiao International CBD. Quite close. No wonder the “valley of flowers” is named after Hongqiao.

A middle-aged man greeted me as I entered the existing floral business area, where a myriad of potted flowers were neatly displayed in greenhouses while pines, camellia trees, olive trees and whatnot stood outdoors.

“Hey, which flower sells best in this season?” I asked the man, who identified himself with his family name Hou.

“Many,” Hou answered. “You could have primrose or rosemary, for example.”



Zhu Maoyun, 72, enjoys his work in the flower farm, which brings him additional income as well as a healthy way of life.

I scanned his stock. Most were affordable for an average customer. A small pot of primrose or rosemary costs 5 yuan. It's a wholesale price, even for an individual customer.

As I looked around, a young woman enthusiastically “grabbed” five pots of lavender at a good bargain. A young man came later and bought two pots of clivia miniata. He then brought in his own big porcelain pot and put the two green plants together. Then came a mother and her daughter, who stooped to smell different flowers before deciding which to buy.

At last, I bought a pot of Lewisia flower, with succulent leaves and white petals, and a pot of burro's tail (sedum morganianum), a jade-green



Hou, a flower farmer in his 50s, plants a handful of Lewisia flowers in a pot at his flower shop in Yangjiazhuang Village.

succulent plant.

“Lewisia is said to be good for a harmonious family life,” Hou told me, cracking a joke based on a popular saying on the Internet. I hadn't heard of that, but anyway I bought it out of an intuitive inclination toward elegant petals. It cost me 15 yuan. The burro's tail cost me 30 yuan — the shop owner deducted 5 yuan from the original price out of good will. As I paid for my flowers, three giggling girls hailing from a nearby town each picked a pot of Lewisia with red petals.

After most customers left, I had a casual chat with Hou. He said he and his wife came from Shaanxi Province in northwest China and settled here in 2016.

They've rented a 600-square-meter greenhouse in the village, and live in a rental apartment adapted from a nearby farmer's house.

“My wife and I usually get up at 5am and receive our first batch of customers at 6am, who are mostly owners of downtown flower shops,” he said. “We won't have a rest until after 6pm. We even have customers from nearby provinces like Jiangsu, because Yangjiazhuang Village is host to one of Shanghai's most popular flower fairs and is located near Jiangsu Province.”

I was glad to see Hou and his wife, both clad in casual winter coats, were busy and happy about their “fragrant” business. Although they are not locals, they have contributed to the village's overall economy with a brisk floral business.

I went to see Hou and his wife again on February 8. This time I arrived a bit earlier, and happened to meet a man who came from Putuo District in downtown Shanghai on a rickshaw to buy flowers and mini-trees for his own flower shop.

“How long did it take you to get here on a rickshaw?” I asked, as he was paying for his collection that had swelled his rickshaw.

“Oh, mine is an electric one, it took me about two hours,” he said. “I used to buy flowers in nearby Zhejiang Province, but now Yangjiazhuang looks fine and is closer.”

After saying goodbye to them, I went deeper into the village and climbed up a hill with a 45-degree slope. I read from a recent news report that this place used to be a dumping ground for sundry wastes, but now it has become a nifty hill planted with various trees, shrubs and bushes. On the small hill, I had a panoramic view of the existing 20 hectares of greenhouses and outdoor grounds for tree cultivation.

What a change flowers can make to the landscape and income of a village! Large plots

of rice and vegetables are still there, but a proper diversification into floral business, which is both more value-added and environmentally friendly, goes a long way toward reviving Shanghai's rural life, that's become ever more intertwined with the urban world. In many ways, flowers are a natural link between man and nature, the city and the countryside.

On my way back to Hou's shop, I saw a man standing on top of a ladder pruning a Spanish olive tree, which is expensive to my knowledge.

“How many olive trees can you sell a year?” I asked.

The man looked down at me, and said very slowly: “Several.”

“Who are your customers?” I was even more curious.

“Individuals who hope to decorate their gardens,” he explained. “Legend has it that olive trees represent peace and longevity.”

He said he was satisfied with the sale of “several” olive trees a year, though it sounded like a slack business to me.

“You need to be patient with trees. You derive a lot of pleasure from just pruning them. If you love trees, you can make it in the long run,” he said, with a full smile. “I've been in this trade for 30 years. Trees are a ‘beautiful trade.’”

The friendly “tree man,” surnamed Sun, said he was 67 years old but his hair was all black.

“Be patient in the tree business,” he repeated his motto. “It's about giving people peace and health.”

Indeed, isn't the power to give people peace and health the very selling point of flowers and trees? Sun and Hou have different business models, but together, they are beautifying our life as well as their village's skyline and landscape.

Last month, the city government announced that Yangjiazhuang had been selected as one of Shanghai's 46 “beautiful villages” in 2022. The floral business certainly made a contribution.