

# A PASSION FOR PLANTS



By Mary Jane Fine

## Kathy Johnson

For years, Kathy Johnson was a watercolorist. Her primary focus: flowers. But that changed rather radically on the morning when inspiration – in the form of a used coffee filter – spun her off in an entirely new direction. “I usually kept them for the compost heap, for my garden,” Johnson says. “But the compost container must’ve been full that morning so I just set the filter down in a bowl on the counter and, as it dried, it made these wonderful blooms out to the edges.”

Those blooms redirected Johnson’s artistic path, leading to work in mixed media. “Working as a collage artist is a natural extension of being a lifelong collector of many things both natural and manmade,” she notes on her website. “I explore ways to find new life and meaning to everyday items that most would consider disposable. Materials such as coffee filters, tea bags, leaf skeletons, candy wrappers, junk mail envelopes and a variety of found and gifted papers are intuitively combined to create harmonious compositions.”





Her mixed media collages have been widely displayed: at the Slater Museum's Converse Gallery, the Mystic Museum of Art, New London's Hygienic Gallery, the Artists Cooperative Gallery of Westerly; and Spectrum Gallery in Essex.

Art was a natural career choice for Johnson, a native of Danbury who showed artistic interest early on. "I knew as a child," she says of her life-long knowledge that art would be her future. "I was always sewing, crocheting..."

In 1990, marriage and a move to Southern California — "We had both grown up in Connecticut and got tired of snow" — added another layer to her artistic pursuits. A fascination with the plant life around her prompted her to learn all she could about the flowers and trees inhabiting the "flat piece of land" they'd bought. And to become a serious gardener.

After a time, Johnson and her husband returned to Connecticut. "My sister was having kids, his brother was having kids," she says, "and we just wanted to be part of our nieces' and nephews' lives." Her love of gardening came home with her, and she soon transformed the deep backyard of her Waterford home with flowers, shrubs, hedges and trees.

In time, those plants returned the favor, becoming the next chapter of her ever developing artistic story: She discovered eco-prints by reading online art blogs



and pursued the craft by learning more, crediting the generosity of an online community of eco-print artists who shared their knowledge with her.

Her website outlines the process:

"Eco printing is a contemporary application of the ancient process of using plant pigments to dye fabric . . . plant material is placed between layers of paper. A heat method (steaming) is applied which causes the pigment from the plant to be transferred to the paper."

Recently, Johnson began hosting small workshops to teach others the techniques

she uses. The sessions, described on her website, cost \$60, plus \$15 for materials. They begin with a meander through Johnson's gardens, where participants collect whichever leaves and flowers appeal to them. By the end of each four-hour workshop, the prints are completed and everyone has a dozen or so one-of-a-kind pieces to take home.

"Plants, heating methods and different types of paper...it's like infinite possibilities," she says. "It gives me a way to make something lasting out of the plants I nurture all year."