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State Brand Designer

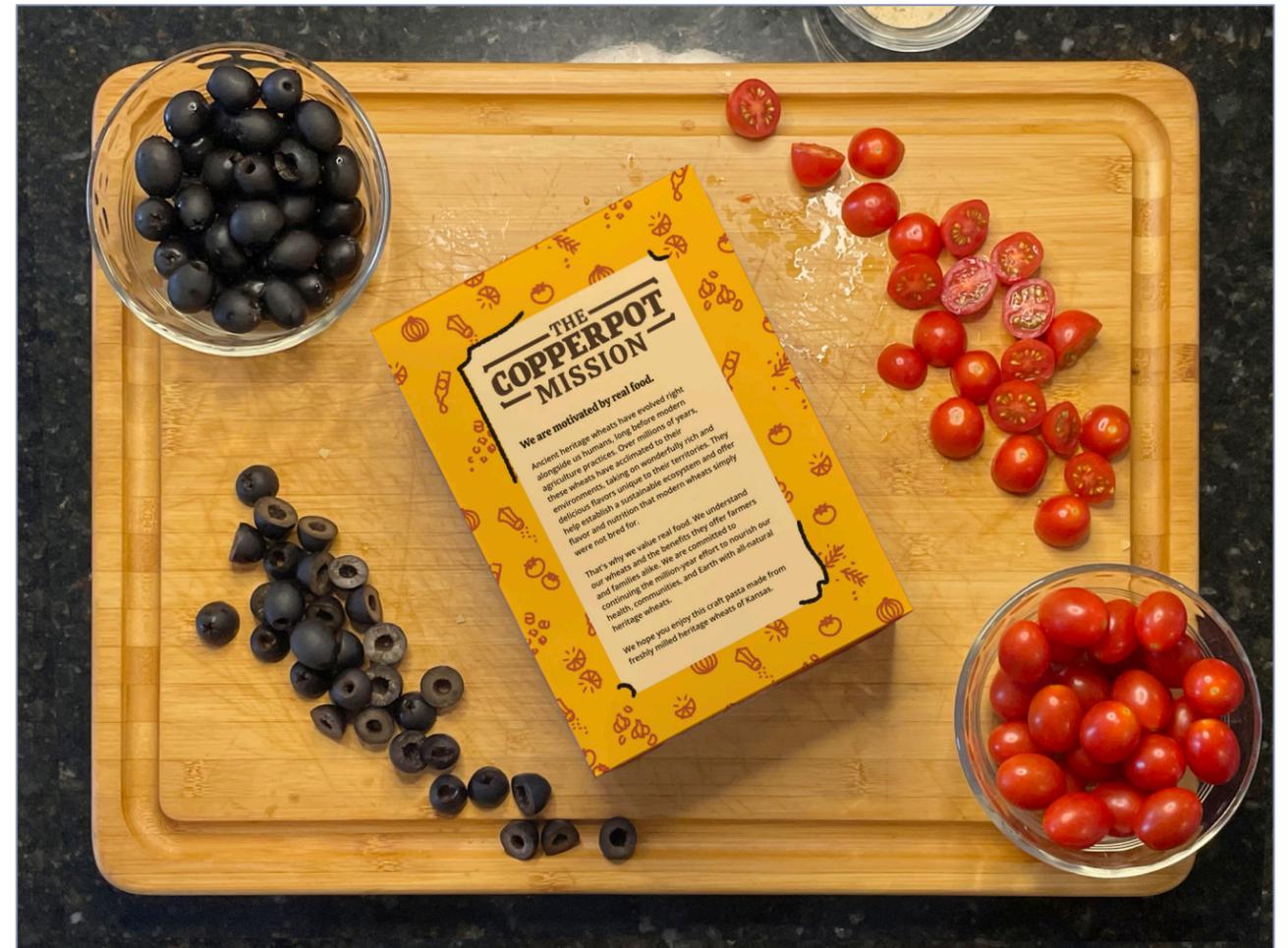
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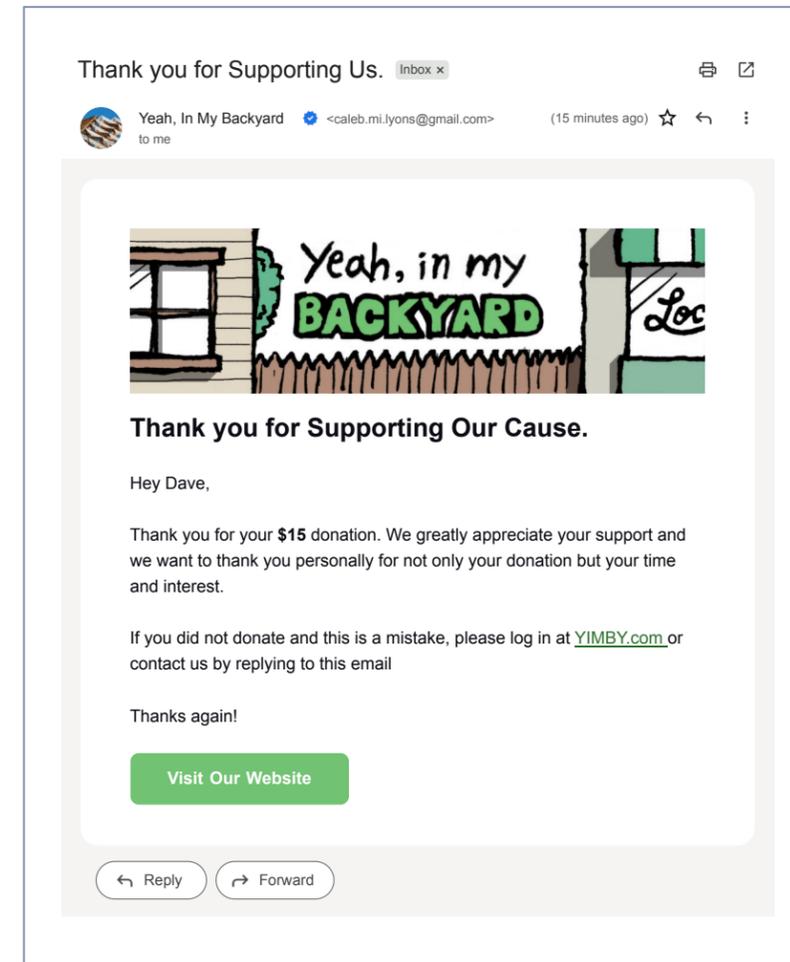
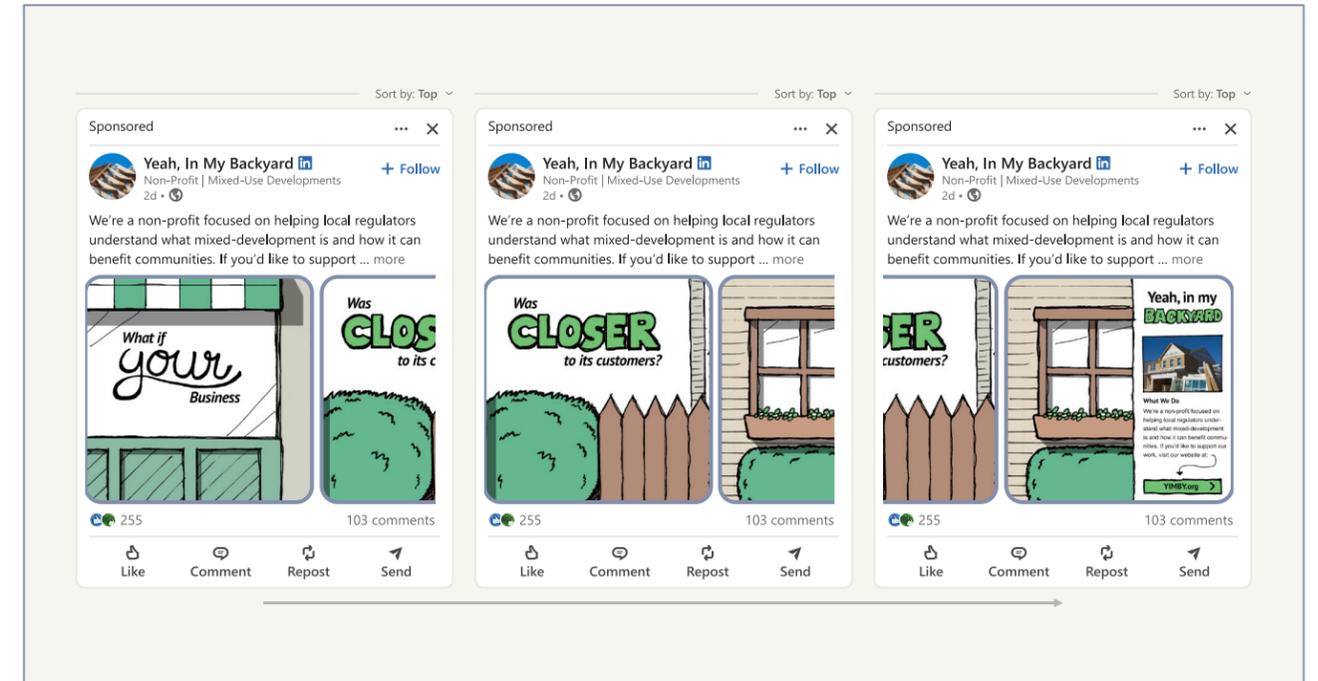
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Colorado's Primary Attributes











**Flower Route Netherlands**

Tulips, hyacinths, narcissi, and daffodils of every color stretch to the horizon along this drive through western Holland.

From the moment the first tulip was planted in Dutch soil, in 1520, the Netherlands has been inextricably linked to flowers. Inventing a whole horticultural industry and turning their lowland fields into a blanket of blooms, the flowers reach their climax, of course, in April and May, when Holland offers Europe's quintessential spring drive. For anyone who wants to see nature in all its glory and smell the roses—or in this case the tulips, hyacinths, narcissi, and daffodils—western Holland is the prime place to be. And the Dutch, as practical as they are aesthetic, have made certain that visitors won't miss a single bloom.

**Overview**  
Starting in Haarlem, the northernmost point of the Bloemen Route (Flower Route)—and running approximately 25 miles (40 kilometers) south to Leiden, this drive takes in the densest concentration of flower fields, with alternating strips of flowers shooting in thick ribbons of primary colors to the flat Dutch horizon. The show starts as early as late January, when the first crocuses come up. These are followed by daffodils, narcissi, and hyacinths. Irises and tulips emerge through early May, followed by gladioli, dahlias, and fragrant lilies. The queen of this nonstop flower extravaganza is the tulip, bursting out in every candy color. Flower sellers set up stalls along the road and sell garlands to adorn your car. But it isn't just the beds of blooms that make this drive eye-popping. What you'll also pass along the route is the stately billion-dollar industry that those seemingly wispy flowers support: the auction houses that sell the flowers; the museums and private gardens that celebrate the horticultural tradition; a series of gated, Venetian-worthy villages that grew rich on the flower industry; and two elegant cities, Haarlem and Leiden, that offer as much history and canal-side beauty per square block as Amsterdam itself. All this makes for a short drive dense in attractions and rich enough to command three days of sightseeing.

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**Start in Haarlem**  
Arrive at your starting point, Haarlem, a day early so you will have time in the city before striking out. (The train from Amsterdam's Central Station to Haarlem leaves at least twice an hour and make the 12-mile/19-kilometer trip west in 20 minutes.) Haarlem's historic center is seaward with canals and punctuated by the landmarks that hometown artists painted.

**The Frans Hals Museum**  
There's a reason why the classic Dutch painters mastered the art of depicting flowers, and it wasn't just because they had fluid imaginations. What the country's Golden Age artists were really painting was a national still life, the view just outside their windows. The best way to get in the mood for your blooming drive is to stop by the Frans Hals Museum (Groot Heiligland 42, [www.franshalsmuseum.com](http://www.franshalsmuseum.com)), one of Holland's top small galleries. Check out Jan van Goyen's fine landscapes, which manage to pack in all the signature Dutch scenery you'll be passing: peary rivers, sailing boats, and villages with church spires. Tellingly, van Goyen himself became notorious in the 17th century for snapping two of his ultimately timeless, priceless paintings for a handful of short-lived tulip bulbs.

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**Lisse**  
From Haarlem, head south on highway N208 to Lisse. This town makes a quaint pit stop in its own right, but its real claim to fame is the Bloemen Route's showstopper: the Keukenhof Garden (Stralingsweg 161a, Lisse), which started as the small kitchen garden of a 15th-century countess and now bills itself as nothing less than the most beautiful spring garden in the world, designed to showcase the art of Dutch bulb growers. Spilling across 70 acres (28 hectares) of wooded parkland and attracting more than 700,000 visitors annually, the garden has nine miles (14 kilometers) of walking paths that wind around ponds, a winding greenhouse pavilion holding indoor displays, and more than seven million bulbs planted three layers deep to ensure a blaze of color from the end of March to mid-May.

**Leiden**  
Continue south, taking N208 to the larger highway A44, and you'll come to the town of Leiden, a calm, crucial Bloemen landmark. The small, historic town is home to Holland's oldest university as well as the Botanical Garden, which looks miniature after Keukenhof but may seem more beautiful in its understatement, and which claims more of a historical pedigree. "The Botanical Garden was planted in 1594," says curator Carla Teune, "and the first director of the garden was Carolus Clusius, one of the greatest botanists of his time. When he came to Leiden, he brought the tulip bulbs to this new garden." Though he didn't plant the first bulbs in Holland, Clusius did nurture a dizzying variety of tulip species, and helped spawn the Dutch tulip craze. Teune recommends some other attractions in Leiden, a town well worth an overnight stay. Among her favorite stops: the De Valk Windmill Museum (Binnenvestgracht 3), where you can climb through an 18th-century windmill to gain a panoramic view of the city; and the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum (Beschuitsteeg 9), which offers an overview of the Pilgrims' life in Holland.

**End in Naaldwijk**  
Now it's time to dive back into the fields. The nice thing about the Bloemen Route is that it allows for a variety of highlights, and one of the best lies about 30 minutes south of Leiden (take A4 south and then turn west on N222) at Naaldwijk, where you can see what a muscular commercial force all those flowers have become, and how important they are to the Dutch economy. "The biggest Dutch flower auctions generate an annual turnover of nearly \$5 billion," says Piet Kruit, senior communications adviser to the Floraholland company, which runs some of the country's largest auctions. The village of Naaldwijk sits in the middle of the Westland, the world's largest greenhouse area, and the Naaldwijk flower auction house (Middel Beekweg 28) offers tours. Though you can't actually participate in the proceedings offers an explanation of the process, from the moment the growers bring in their flowers to when the wholesalers, retailers, and exporters start bidding on the harvest. It's a reminder of the besotted 17th-century Dutch collectors who were willing to swap tracts of land, bags of gold, carriages, and canal houses for a precious treat of a few rare tulip bulbs.

**“ For anyone who wants to see nature in all its glory. ”**

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