



Trifecta of Talent

Susan Studer King

Farming. Floral design. Photography. It's exceedingly difficult to be truly successful in any one of these three professions. So, it's notable to find someone who is successful at all three seemingly disparate fields. The Seasonal Bouquet Project brought together two such talented people who dared—"double dog dared" to be exact—one another to grow, design and photograph floral art utilizing seasonal flowers from their respective farms. What started as a creative collaboration between two self-described "flower fanatics," grew through the savvy use of social media to reach an international audience, change a staid floral industry, and catalyze an army of new "farmer florists."

Jennie Love and Erin Benzakein both grow large quantities of high quality specialty cut flowers on approximately two acres of flowers in Zone 7 (the USDA hardiness scale which determines what plants will thrive in that location). But that is where the similarities of their businesses start and end. Jennie Love's farm, Love n' Fresh Flowers, is located smack-dab in the middle of Philadelphia and is one of the nation's only urban flower farms. She offers sustainably grown flowers and distinctive floral design services for high-end



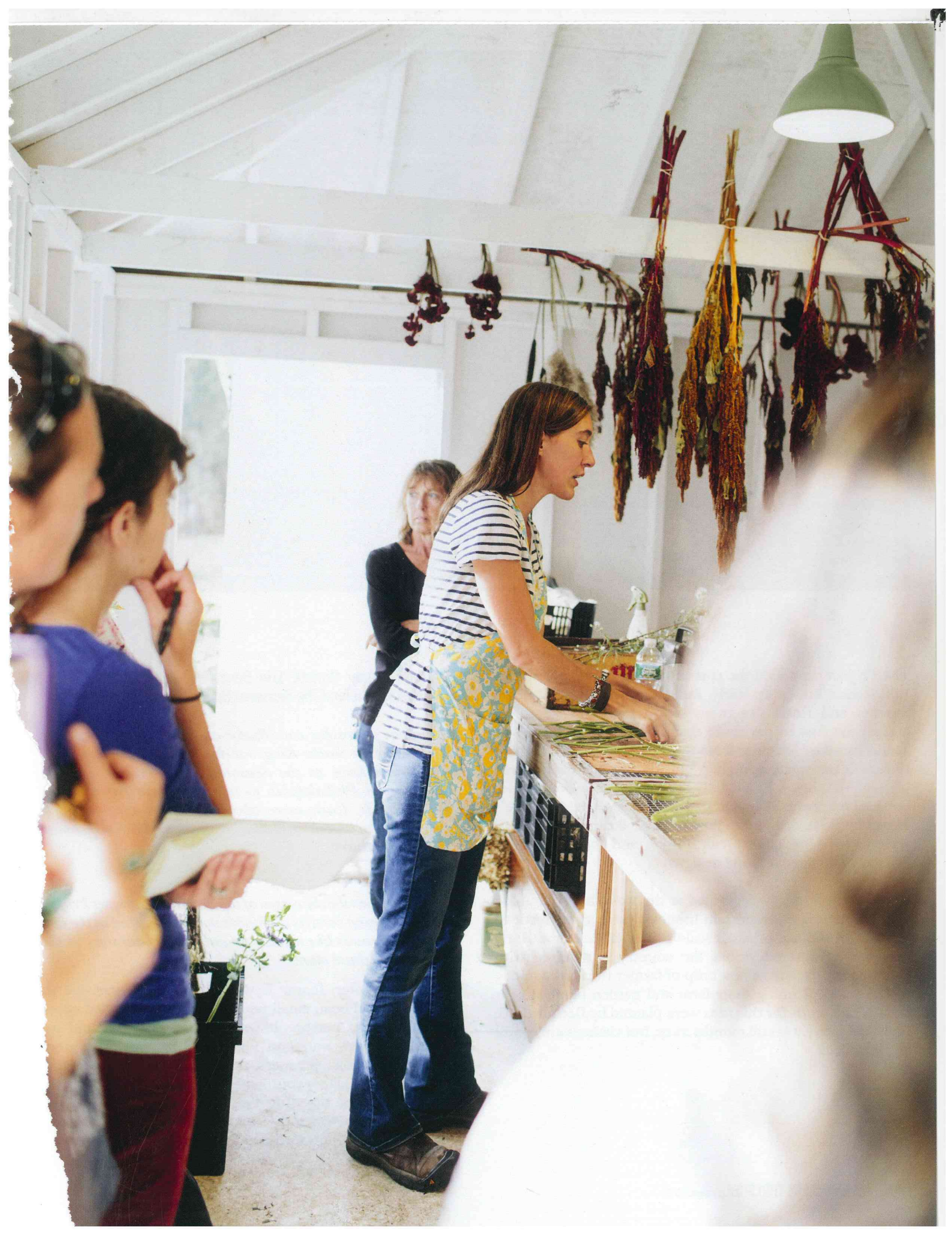
weddings and special events. Meanwhile, 2,900 miles to the west, Erin Benzakien's certified organic farm, Floret, is located in the scenic Skagit Valley, 70 miles north of Seattle. She grows flowers primarily for high-end grocery stores and offers design services for just a select number of special events.

The two friends teamed up to share the bounty and beauty of their flower farms on their shared website, theseasonalbouquetproject.com. Each week, the duo posted striking photographs of highly stylized bouquets featuring seasonal and sustainably-grown flowers. Their competitive spirit challenged them to utilize unexpected—and sometimes downright unusual—elements in their designs. Among the nontraditional natural materials included in their bouquets: garlic, crab apples, raspberries, green cedar cones, baby persimmons, and even cherry tomatoes and green beans. The two talented designers tucked these elements alongside show-stopping blooms such as the coveted café au lait dahlia, heirloom narcissus and rare antique mums—all varieties that few traditional florists have rarely seen, much less used in designs. The result: stop-you-in-your-tracks stunning floral designs.

A new floral movement takes root

With each week and each photo posted, the Seasonal Bouquet Project website following grew. And grew. And grew. After fielding a flood of questions via emails from aspiring flower farmers from across the country—and around the globe—all wishing to replicate their distinctive designs and learn how to grow or when to harvest every flower variety featured, the pair decided to host a live Q&A webcast last winter. “We were both typing as fast as our little fingers would go and we still couldn’t keep ahead of the questions,” Benzakein says with a laugh. “It was then that we realized there was a real need for what we had to offer. Jennie made me swear that if The Seasonal Bouquet Project was a success, that I’d fly out at the end of the season to celebrate with a workshop at her farm.” Thus, the idea of The Seasonal Bouquet Project: Live was born.

“When I first started putting together plans for hosting the workshop at my farm, I was thinking we’d aim for ten to twelve people max,” Love shared. “I got everything set up online and then with anxious heart, hit ‘publish.’ Within a few hours, all the seats had sold! Then my inbox was literally flooded with dozens of emails from people begging to attend.”





The Project propelled the pair to veritable rock star status. Like teens lining up early for concert tickets, aspiring farmers and floral designers set their alarms so to be among the first to pay more than one thousand dollars to spend two days learning from the nation's foremost farmer florists. One small workshop quickly morphed into three bigger workshops. In all, sixty-six participants from across the United States, Canada and Russia traveled to Love's Philadelphia farm to learn how to grow dozens of different varieties of high quality cut flowers and then use those blooms in distinctive floral designs.

The creative synergy generated at the workshops, coupled with the power of Instagram hashtags have given birth to a powerful alliance of small scale flower farmers and floral designers. Scattered across the country but united with common aspirations, a new crop of farmer florists is quietly plotting and planning their farm and garden plantings for 2014. The seeds for this idea were planted by Benzakein & Love; the harvest is still months away, but chances are, it will be beautiful.

Q+A with farmer florists, Erin Benzakein and Jennie Love, the creative team behind The Seasonal Bouquet Project

Broadway+Thresher contributor and co-owner of Buckeye Blooms, Susan Studer King, sat down with Erin Benzakein and Jennie Love at the Seasonal Bouquet Project: Live workshop in Philadelphia to talk about current wedding flower trends, learn more about the back story of their collaboration, and discuss their aspirations for transforming the floral industry.

B+T - You describe the origin of the Seasonal Bouquet Project website as being born as a "double dog dare" between the two of you. It sounds like there is an interesting backstory to the blog, care to share more?

EB - Last winter, Jennie flew out for a weeklong visit to my farm. We'd been email pen pals for years but had never actually met in person. It was an awesome visit and we seriously talked, non-stop for like three days in a row! Flowers, weddings, business, marketing, our future dream and our grand plans, you name it, we covered it in depth. That window of time together was so uplifting and so inspiring that we vowed then and there to find a way to keep that wonderful connection going on into the coming year.



JL - We were trying to figure out a good way to collaborate together from afar and to continue to fan our creative sparks through the drudgery of the long growing season. The dare came about when we both realized we weren't sure if we could actually motivate ourselves individually to make a design "just for fun" and photograph it every single week of the season. Erin said "I dare you!" and then I said "I double dog dare you!" And so it began. And we did it! We both posted a unique design every single week of the season, no matter how tired and zapped we felt. For me, the weekly SBP design became a reprieve every Tuesday morning. I was so grateful to have an excuse to set time aside for myself. It was one of the few constants in my whirlwind schedule.

B+T - *Jennie, your flower farm is located in an urban environment. Meanwhile, Erin, you are growing your flowers in a more rural area, right? How have those environments influenced your farms and businesses?*

EB - Being a good distance from the city (Seattle is seventy miles away) it was pretty tough in the beginning to juggle meetings, deliveries, farm chores and raising two little kiddos. I spent way too much time on the road! Early on it became clear that I needed to choose a direction to take things and the wholesale route really fit in with being a "stay at home" mom. Now that the kids are a little older and we have some really wonderful farm help, we'll be transitioning

towards taking on more weddings and events.

JL - As an urban flower farm, I had to pick the highest value end use for my flowers in order to cover the tremendously high overhead of growing flowers in the city. My brides love knowing their flowers were grown just a few miles from where they say "I do", and they are pleased to know their wedding dollars are going to support a small farm dedicated to keeping open space green and viable in our urban environment. Philadelphia is a city hugely committed to supporting locally-grown and locally-made enterprises. Love 'n Fresh has been fortunate to tap into that market. My farm would be very different if it wasn't located in Philadelphia. If it was in a rural location like Erin's, I would probably be focusing on high volume production for wholesale like she is.

B+T - *You are both pioneers in the local flower wedding movement and—correct me if I'm wrong—have helped coined the term, (or at least the hashtag!) "farmer florist." What is your vision for the future of this movement?*

JL - Yes, I definitely consider my job title to be "farmer florist" since I grow flowers specifically for wedding designs that I create myself. That title really sums it all up so nicely. When I first started working in weddings five years ago, it was a battle to get clients to properly value locally-grown flowers. They definitely felt like they should be getting farmers market pricing and that farm flowers were the cheap





alternative. If I've contributed anything to the local flower movement, I hope it's a better appreciation for the fact that locally-grown flowers are actually a more customized approach to wedding flowers than traditional floristry and thus require an equal or, ideally, higher investment.

It's great to see the industry shifting as a whole as high-end designers begin seeking out locally-grown, seasonal materials and promoting it widely across social media. Several are even starting their own farms. I'm certain that locally-grown seasonal blooms will become a mainstay in the wedding world in the near future. And it's for good reason: the locally-grown materials are so much more interesting and fresh. Today's couples are eager to embrace a more authentic experience that's all their own and not just defer to the traditions and looks that have been around for the past few decades. It's a fun and energetic time to be in the wedding business!

EB - Oh, gosh, the possibilities are endless! But as Jennie and I both say all of the time, it can be really, really tough to wear both hats. Flower farming is an incredibly rewarding, completely exhausting profession. You're dealing with constant weather up's and downs, crop losses, mystery diseases, variety trends—it's a full time gig. Then add being a florist into the mix and things get even trickier. I believe that if you want to be both, you should totally go for it! But we've met and worked with so many farmers who are really, really passionate about growing amazing flowers but struggle to

find an outlet for their goods. And every single day, there is at least one email in my in-box from a frustrated designer longing for the beautiful garden type flowers that they see on our site and begging us to ship. If we could find a way to connect these two passionate groups of people, the entire industry would be transformed!

B+T - What are some of the floral trends you're seeing (or perhaps setting) for weddings? And are there any trends you'd like to die?

JL - I'll answer the latter first. I hope mason jars are on their way out. For trends coming up, I personally have been pushing heirloom mums for a couple seasons now as a great late-season wedding flower as more and more couples get married in October and November. This fall saw a tremendous interest in them with other local growers, including Erin. So I think my mission may be complete!

Overall, I think we'll be seeing a lot more color in 2014 and 2015. The past few years it's been all about blush and neutrals, but I see more and more colors creeping in and think deep jewel tones are up next. Another trend I guess I'm helping push and love is the idea of bridesmaids carrying something other than a bouquet. One fun option has been a delicate wreath for them to carry. Another option is flower jewelry, like a lush flower necklace, hair piece, or ring.



EB - I have just loved seeing the wedding world move towards a much looser, more natural style of design. Scrambling vines, wildflower type blooms, flouncy garden roses, fruit on the branch, scented herbs and fuzzy little grasses are now commonplace in bouquets. It seems that garden romance is finally taking hold!

B+T - *You both have enjoyed tremendous success in inspiring—and now teaching—a new generation of flower farmers and “farmer florists,” but part of your mission in this project has been to impact the “wider audience.” Who is that audience, and what impact have you been able to make?*

JL - The wider audience was both other designers and potential clients. From my prospective, it's been quite a success. Several established designers were at our workshop, inspired and eager to learn about how to either begin growing themselves or to partner with growers in their area to get more locally-grown materials. I think the SBP demonstrated that there's a huge range of materials available that many designers have never even seen! I think any first-class designer is going to say “I want that!” and go looking for it. So the blog was tremendously good at motivating designers to seek out local sources for unusual elements that will elevate their designs.

From a client prospective, it's been fantastic for me as I now have even more images in my portfolio that are more in line with my own vision for designs throughout the season. So I

got to try out color combinations that might have been tough to sell in concept to clients, but now that I have a good image, they love it! So the SBP will continue to serve as a library of inspiration that will no doubt influence more than a few wedding decisions this coming season.

EB - When we began, the main goal was to see if we could in fact create a beautiful bouquet, using all local ingredients for an entire season. I've heard mentioned so many times, that sticking to all local product was impossible. But with a little perseverance, we did it! Not only did we demonstrate that it was a doable option but I think a lot of minds were changed in the process, especially in the florist realm.

B+T - *What is the next chapter for The Seasonal Bouquet Project? Will you continue to do weekly posts of your floral creations next year, or will there be a new “double dog dare”?*

JL - The Seasonal Bouquet Project was originally meant to be a one season project, and we didn't intend to keep the blog going past the October frost. So, it's bitter sweet to see this project come to a close given how much fun it was.

EB - We are still mulling over ideas on next steps. Do we keep on going with our original track, do come up with a new dare, do we break off and pursue our own individual projects...there are so many options!

JL - We've tapped into a greater movement, and Erin and I are going to continue to work to move the revolution forward.



Read More:

*The Seasonal Bouquet Project--
theseasonalbouquetproject.com*

*Love 'n Fresh Flower Farm--
lovenfreshflowers.com*

*Floret--
floretflowers.com*