

Flower

A local, organic sensibility blossoms with a new generation of farmer-florists

BY BETSY ANDREWS



Erin and Chris Benzakein (middle) harvest pink and purple asters, tiny blue statice, and yellow gaillardia with their kids, Jasper, 12, and Elora, 15, at Florét in Mount Vernon, Washington.

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rom the hoop houses sheltering young plants to the dahlia field now knee-deep in mud, Erin Benzakein is showing me around. It is February in Washington's Skagit Valley.

Floret, the two-acre flower farm that Benzakein, 35, tends with her husband, Chris, and their kids, Jasper and Elora, is a world of sleepy possibility. Benzakein, though, is wide-eyed with enthusiasm for the dahlia roots "just waking up," in the warm greenhouse, the ranunculus that are starting to bud, the Icelandic poppies at the cracking bud stage, their furry green heads only hinting at prying open. Soon enough, everything will have bounded from its beds. By May, the sweet peas and larkspur will have been sown. The parrot tulips and those poppies—a fracas of pink, tangerine, and crimson—will already be cut. The dahlias will go in where the mud was, coming out of the ground by August, around 500 bunches a week.

Last year, the Benzakeins grew 400 varieties on a farm no bigger than many suburban lawns. They did so using intensive but certified-organic practices: landscape fabric to keep the weeds down and cover crops to hide insect-eating frogs; compost teas and the leavings of the family's pampered chickens, rather than chemical fertilizers; meticulous testing and rebalancing of the soil. Sent to groceries and into the hands of brides throughout the Pacific Northwest, the harvest is a gorgeous profusion that has garnered Erin Benzakein 67,000 Instagram followers.

"I started sharing the story of our life growing flowers, and that went viral," she says. "Once people see you standing in a field with 4,000 dahlias, they are blown away."

Benzakein is perhaps the most visible of the new farmer-florists inspired by the farm-to-table movement to transform what has become a dirty, global industry and revitalize sustainable American flower growing. In the process, they're reshaping the floral aesthetic, breaking the rules of cut-flower arranging by designing as if the flowers hadn't been cut at all.

"The wholesale market has always depended on stiff, straight stems that ship in boxes, and the arrangements are stiff and straight and uniform-looking," says Lynn Byczynski, author of *The Flower Farmer: An Organic Grower's*

This page, from top: 'Karma Sangria' dahlias stretch toward the afternoon sun in a field at Floret; Elora and Erin Benzakein put finishing touches on a bridal bouquet of mixed roses, celosia, and feverfew.



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The Kolla family
first started growing
flowers with Abby
in 1980. Today,
Silver Lake Farms is
a well-known name in
the Pacific Northwest.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE M. WAITE (2). THIS PAGE: ADDIE JUELL/FLORAL. STYLIST: LINDSEY TAYLOR

THE FARMER-FLORIST BOUQUET

Producers like Floret's Erin Benzakein and Silver Lake Farms' Tara Kolla create naturalistic mixed bouquets like this one, including peonies, scabiosa, Queen Anne's lace, anemone, clematis, and lilac cascading over the rim, all arranged to mirror their character in the garden. Single statement flowers like the towering allium and hits of strong color, as in the chocolate cosmos, add contrast to an otherwise soft, sweet arrangement.

Tara Kolla harvests coral bush and pyrethrum while Abby Powell looks on at Silver Lake Farms in Los Angeles.

LOCAL FLOWERS

The best way to guarantee that your cut flowers are fresh, organic, and gentle on fuel use and carbon emissions is to buy directly from local farmers, at farmers' markets, field stands, and pop-ups, as well as through CSAs. "Ask how they control pests," says Lynn Byczynski. The right answer: biological controls and environmentally responsible sprays approved by the National Organic Program.

MAIL-ORDER FLOWERS

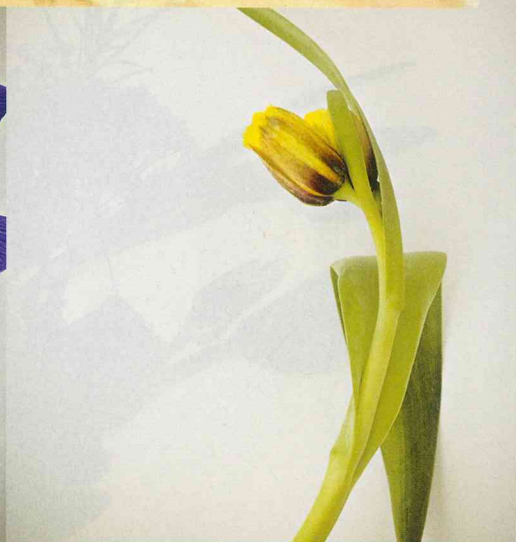
To minimize waste and maximize freshness, get cut-to-order flowers shipped straight from farms. Marc Kessler and Julia Keener of California Organic Flowers tend their certified-organic stems all the way from seed or bulb to the FedEx truck. The Bouqs, a company based in Southern California, harvests to order from farms there, in Colombia, and in Ecuador that are certified sustainable by the Rainforest Alliance and by Veriflora, which does allow some pesticides.

WHOLE FOODS FLOWERS

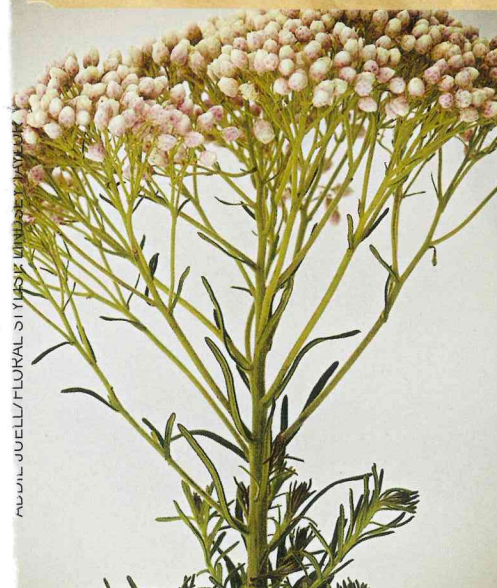
The chain's "Whole Trade Guarantee"—backed by certifications from Fair Trade USA, Fairtrade International, Fair for Life, and the Rainforest Alliance—labels flowers grown on farms in developing countries that provide fair wages and working conditions, support local communities, and treat the environment responsibly. The Responsibly Grown rating system prohibits the most harmful chemicals and ranks flowers "good," "better," and "best" to reflect farms' impact on the environment and human health. Bouquets carry the name of the farm where they were grown.



Among farmer-florists' favorites for cutting gardens, top row, from left: **SCABIOSA**, a small, lacy, but tough plant, blooms and blooms from summer to fall. Early summer **ALLIUMS** come in a huge range, from softball-sized and soaring 'Purple Sensation' to diminutive pink lily-leeks. The maroon-dabbled fritillaria, or **CHECKERED LILY**, a beloved subject of the master Art Nouveau painter Charles Rennie Mackintosh, adds visual and historical interest. Middle row, from left: A climber good for small spaces, **CLEMATIS** cascades naturally over the lip of a vase.



Open, colorful **ANEMONES** add punch to bunches. A late-spring bloomer with bell-shaped flowers, **FRITILLARIA MICHAILOVSKYI** lends yellow and brown accents to bouquets, and its foliage adds a swooping appeal. Bottom row, from left: Drought-tolerant **YARROW** is a great filler with its sturdy but lacelike structure. Gestural **ASTRANTIA**, in dusty to dark shades, is great for dabs of contrasting color in an arrangement and doesn't take up much garden space. **DELPHINIUM**, with its stalks of delicate flowers, brings an upright, spiky structure to bouquets.



ADDIE JUEL/FLORAL STYLING; JENNIFER WATSON

THE GROCERY-MEETS-GARDEN BOUQUET

Match certified-sustainable supermarket flowers (see "Whole Foods Flowers," page 80) with your own cuttings to mix the seasons. Here, summertime yarrow and throat flower bring contrasting texture and scale to spring tulips from Whole Foods. Loose and informal in a pitcher whose blue hue complements the orange tulips, this is a friendly bouquet for an entry hall.



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Think to Rainy and Sunny Cut Flower. "The trend with local flowers is toward something that is more natural, organic, and just a lot more fluid. Good flowers [are]..."
...ask Abby Powell. In a 2014...
...the young floral designer...
...for his white blossoms on a...
...Tara Kolls, who is enjoying...
...illustrating the skyline of Los Angeles...
...are up before the birds—and the...
...production takes the worst of...

Farmer-florists are reshaping floral aesthetics and breaking the rules of cut-flower arranging

Erin Benzakein stands in her dahlia field holding a 'Bracken Rose' dahlia. In summer, 4,000 flowers bloom on this quarter-acre plot. It's intensive farming achieved through careful tending of the organic soil.

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Guide to Raising and Selling Cut Flowers. “The trend with local flowers is toward something that is more natural, organic, and just a lot more fluid. Good florists love that.”

Just ask Abby Powell. In a Southern California canyon, the young floral designer is raiding an orange tree for its white blossoms on a quarter-acre farmed by Tara Kolla, who is snipping anemones nearby. The sun is just illuminating the skyline of Los Angeles in the distance. We are up before the birds—and the film crews. Yesterday, a production kicked the women off the plot.

Kolla shrugs, “This is LA.” Her skin should be thick enough for Hollywood by now. In 2009, her half-acre home-stead and this satellite field were ordered shut down. The scrappy 49-year-old owner of Silver Lake Farms fought for the right to sow and sell flowers, and in 2010, the Food and Flowers Freedom Act was passed. “Now anybody in LA can grow food, flowers, and fibers and sell them off-site,” Kolla says triumphantly in a broad British accent.

Clanking musically, the women harvest into water-filled jars set in handsomely rusted iron carriers. They’ll sell these filled with arrangements at a pop-up sidewalk sale the next day. They gather sweet peas and lupines, yes, but also limbs of tea tree, Australian rosemary, and other shrubs.

“Oh, who’s this?” Powell says, bending toward a silver-green plant. Kolla informs her that this is a weed.

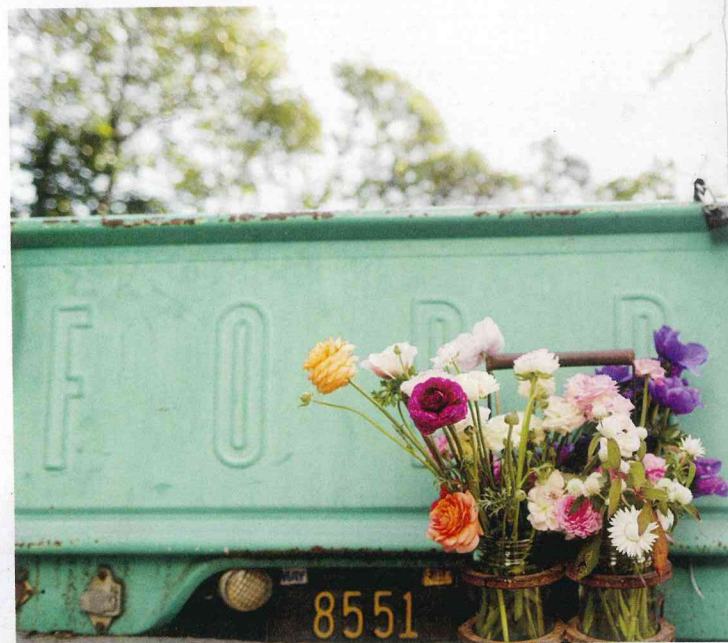
“I cut a lot of weeds,” Powell says.

“Foraged elements, even from the orchard, vineyard, or vegetable patch, are all integrated into the zeitgeist,” says Debra Prinzing, the author and podcaster who coined the term for the wares of farmers like Benzakein and Kolla: *slow flowers*. It’s a zeitgeist that’s luring not only small farmers but also larger ones and even farmers abroad, all spurred by flower lovers’ demands for sustainable bouquets. “Emerging farmer-florists are the role models,” Prinzing says.

The position comes with responsibility. “Our environment here thrives on lizards, birds, and that sort of diversity, so I don’t use sprays because that would damage it,” Kolla says. “At the same time, we’re supposed to produce perfect blooms, so we have to educate our customer that, in the real world, the flowers aren’t perfect.”

Indeed, their stems may curve or their leaves in this droughty climate may have some of what Kolla calls “freckles.” But as the proverb goes, a beautiful thing is never perfect. ♣

This page, from top: Ranunculus, strawflowers, gomphrenas, and anemones rest on the bumper of Tara Kolla’s pickup; the Benzakein kids with their farm cat, Maya, and a bucket of ‘Café au Lait’ dahlias.



The trend with local flowers is toward more natural, organic, and a lot more fluid



THE ECO-FRIENDLY MAIL-ORDER BOUQUET

Premade bunches can be rearranged. Here, the succulent from the Bouqs' Sweet 'n Cuddly California-grown mix (see "Mail-Order Flowers," page 80) has been removed to a bud vase, while the asters, goldenrod, and other blooms have been swept into a dramatic, horizontal centerpiece. The color of the Marité Acosta vase matches the warm whites of the woody-stemmed broom and the large, spotted alstroemeria.