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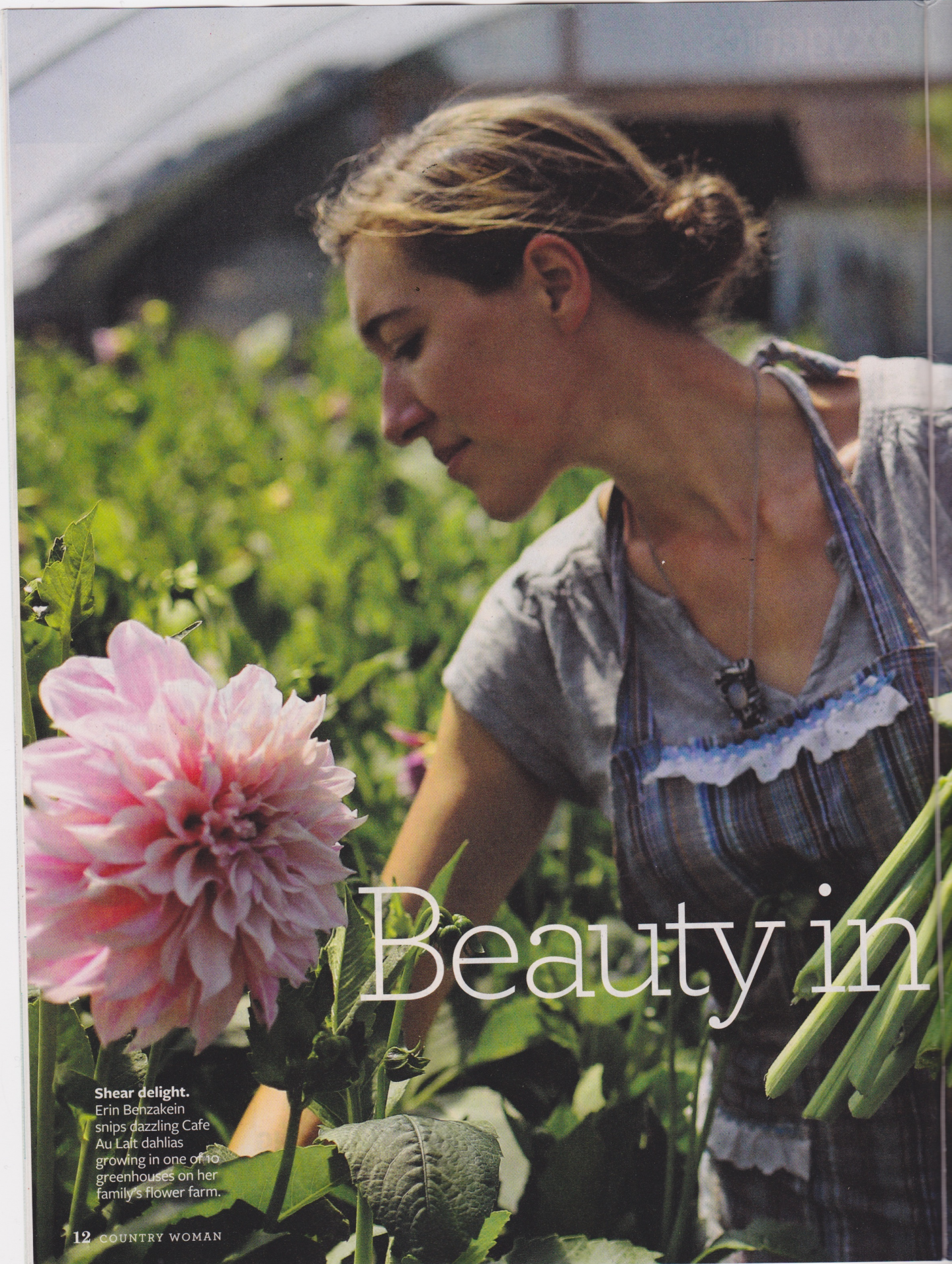


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### Flower power

blooms anew in this gorgeous organic garden.

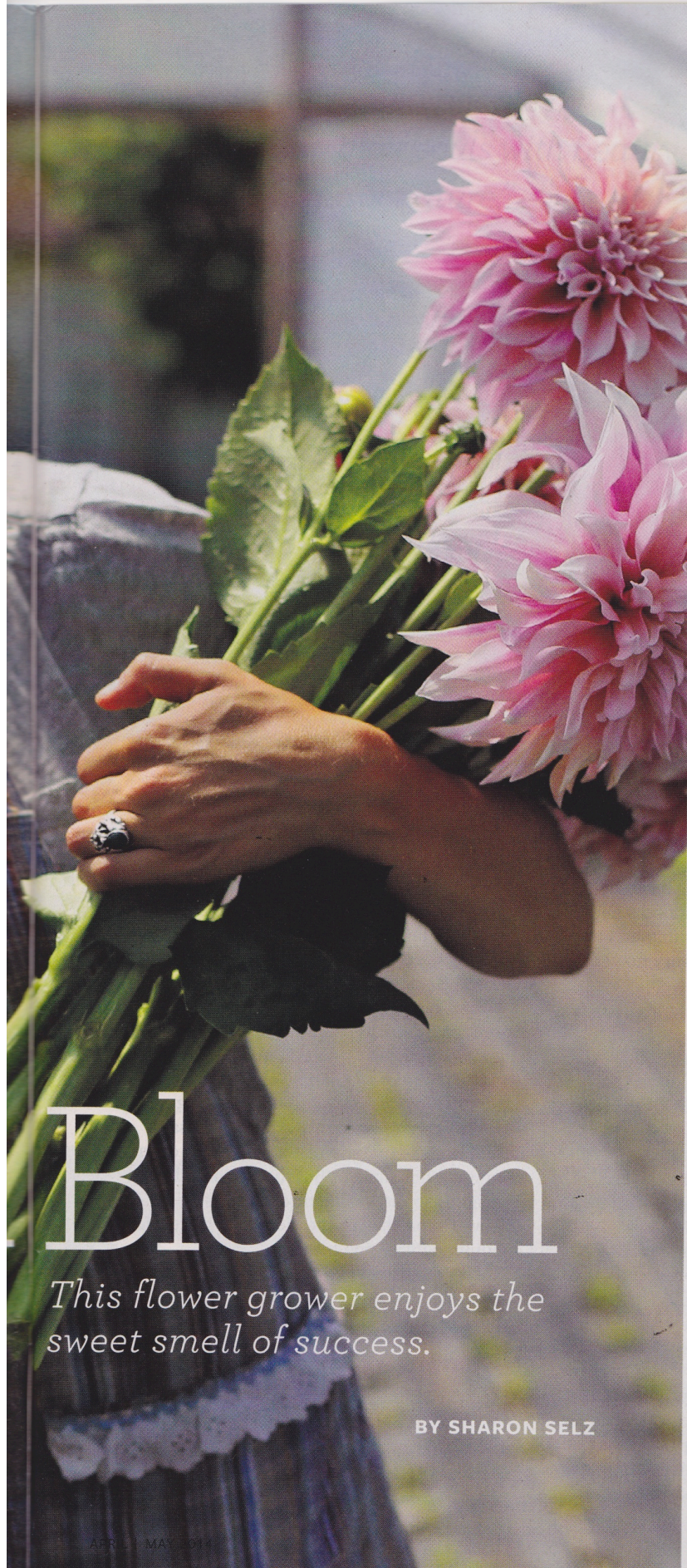




# Beauty in

**Shear delight.**  
Erin Benzakein snips dazzling Cafe Au Lait dahlias growing in one of 10 greenhouses on her family's flower farm.





# Bloom

*This flower grower enjoys the sweet smell of success.*

BY SHARON SELZ

# B

**Bury your nose** in a bunch of Erin Benzakein's blossoms and you'll catch a fresh whiff of nostalgia. The self-taught organic farmer has a growing attraction to flowers, including many with a colorful past.

"Our specialty is old-fashioned charmers like peonies, sweet peas, rambling roses, lilacs, snapdragons and dahlias," she says from Floret Flower Farm ([floretflowers.com](http://floretflowers.com)), the scenic acreage she cultivates with husband Chris and their children in Washington's Skagit Valley. "We put a ton of effort into our soil and really baby our plants." In turn, they produce huge, healthy blooms with vibrant colors, long-lasting beauty and a fragrance that smells like heaven on earth.

A Seattle-born city girl, she'd wanted her own plot of land as long as she can remember. In her early 20s, she indulged her dream, starting a landscaping business with a friend. But helping others nurture their lawns and gardens made her green thumb itch even more.

"After our daughter, Elora, was born, the urge to have my own land was so strong, we finally moved to the country," Erin says from their homestead outside Mount Vernon. "We put in berry bushes, fruit trees and a big vegetable garden. But the most memorable crop turned out to be a double row of sweet peas I planted in remembrance of my great-grandmother.

"A friend ordered a bundle of them as gifts—and I'll never forget my first delivery. When I handed the woman her flowers, she took one

PHOTO: CHRIS BENZAKEIN





#### Field of dreams.

Erin and husband Chris survey their colorful crop at the peak of harvest. “I describe our farm as an insanely overgrown cutting garden,” she notes.

#### Graceful bouquets

take shape under the practiced hands of Erin and animal-loving daughter Elora (opposite). “We put flowers together as they grow in nature,” Erin explains.

sniff and tears welled up in her eyes. She was transported to childhood summers in her grandmother’s garden.

“Seeing such a simple thing have such a profound impact, I knew I’d found something worth doing. The following summer, I tore out the vegetables and planted every flower I could get my hands on!”

#### A Budding Ambition

Seven years later, Erin tenderly tends 2 acres of eco-friendly field flowers and 10 greenhouses—abloom March through October with hundreds of seasonal varieties. Customers for their fresh-cut bounty include specialty grocery stores, local wholesalers and small flower shops, plus couples with their hearts set on a green wedding.

“I have a lot of fun tucking unusual elements into wedding arrangements—everything from chili peppers to carrots and peas on the vine,” Erin says. “Nature also inspires my designs. I love bouquets that look like they’ve just been scooped up from a meadow.”

A passion for flowers has grown on the rest of the Benzakein family, too. “Chris oversees our soil work, composting, irrigation, greenhouse building and deliveries,” she says. “Elora, now 13, helps me make bouquets and

is a master flower packer. And Jasper, who’s 10, does tractor work, fills flower buckets at harvest and labels our flower sleeves.”

Her children are the main motivation for her organic practices. “Our home is in the center of our little farm, and our children live outdoors among the flowers during the growing season,” she says. “They build forts and make doll picnics out of bits from the garden. I’m aware that anything I use on our crop will be in direct contact with Jasper and Elora.”

To have a steady supply of materials all season long, “we’re constantly planting, seeding, watering and weeding,” Erin says, describing workdays that stretch from dawn to well after sunset. “But there’s something magical about wading through waist-high flowers and sharing the view with butterflies, hummingbirds and bees.

“It’s the hardest work I’ve ever done, but it’s also the most rewarding. And as much as I love flowers, I love sharing them even more.”

#### Know a country woman we should profile?

Tell us about her and why she’s inspiring, following the Contributor Guidelines on page 64. Put CW Profile in the subject line.



*“Flower farmers feed people by  
nourishing their souls with beauty  
and the magic of nature.”*



TURN TO PAGE 16 TO GET  
YOUR GARDEN STARTED

### **Erin's picks**

Want to grow your own cutting garden? Erin shares a few of her all-time favorites:

#### **Sweet Peas**

These nostalgic vines climb up to 6 feet, blossom for months, come in a rainbow of colors and are incredibly fragrant. Grow the heirloom varieties for the best scent. I'm partial to April in Paris sweet peas—creamy white with lilac edges.

#### **Snapdragons**

This old-fashioned favorite's a must-have, providing early-season color, texture and a light citrus scent. I adore the open-faced types called Chantilly, with blooms resembling ruffled petticoats in a lovely array of sherbet hues.

#### **Black-eyed Susans**

These cheerful midsummer flowers are highly productive and great in mixed bouquets. I especially love Indian Summer (yellow with black eyes) and Chim Chiminee (unique quilled flowers in russets, browns and golds).

#### **Zinnias**

Festive and candy-colored, these flowers bloom from midsummer to fall. Feed them heavily in the beginning, and you'll be rewarded with up to 30 blooms per plant! I like the Benary Giant series with large flowers and clear colors.

#### **Dahlias**

These beauties bloom for up to three months in later summer. I'm particularly fond of the ball varieties in jewel tones. Dahlia plants get heavy, so stake them with bamboo or use netting for support.





**Delphiniums thrive** with plenty of pampering in Erin's sun-soaked greenhouse.

### **Grow your own bouquet**

*Use these tips from Erin to grow bright bunches of fresh flowers right outside your back door.*

**Situate** your cutting garden in full sun (at least six to eight hours a day) in a spot protected from cold winds. Make sure the soil drains freely to prevent standing water and root rot. Use a balanced organic fertilizer. During the growing season, feed your plants by applying either compost tea or fish emulsion directly to the leaves every two to three weeks.

**Support** your plants with garden trellis netting or bamboo canes to keep stems straight and prevent them from toppling in spring rains. Set stakes and netting when plants are still small.

**Water** your flowers deeply. If you have a large garden, drip irrigation, taking water to the root zone, is ideal. Give plants a soaking once a week for four to six hours.

**Deadhead** often. The more you cut, the more flowers you'll get. If you stop snipping, the plants will slow down and eventually go to seed.