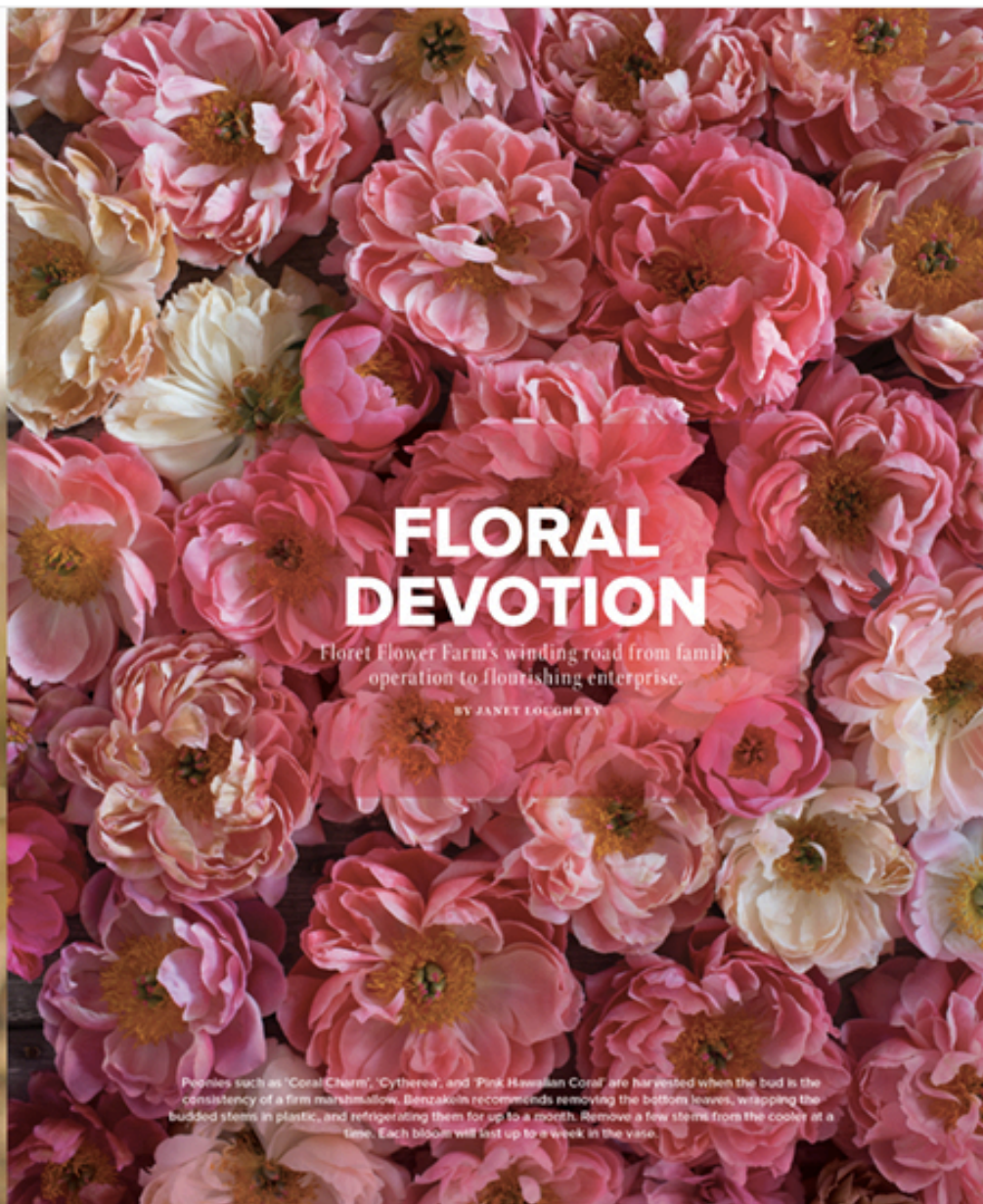


MAKER



Erin Benzakoin is in her fields at the crack of dawn to harvest flowers for shipping to grocery stores and wholesale outlets. Ball-shaped dahlias such as these "Snobs Doris" and "Suncrest" have a long vase life and are among the most productive varieties she grows.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JANEY LOUGHREY



## FLORAL DEVOTION

Floret Flower Farm's winding road from family operation to flourishing enterprise.

BY JANEY LOUGHREY

Peonies such as 'Coral Charm', 'Cytherea', and 'Pink Hawaiian Coral' are harvested when the bud is the consistency of a firm marshmallow. Benzakoin recommends removing the bottom leaves, wrapping the budded stems in plastic, and refrigerating them for up to a month. Remove a few stems from the cooler at a time. Each bloom will last up to a week in the vase.





One of the most requested varieties for weddings, "Cafe au Lait" dahlia produces ruffled blooms in tones of soft pink and creamy beige. This color palette is particularly popular with brides, Benzakein says, because it's both elegant and romantic.



"Blue Shift" is Floret Flower Farm's most popular variety of sweet pea, with oversized blooms that start out bright mauve and fade to a true turquoise as they age—a rarity in flower color.

It's long been said that while food nourishes the body, it's flowers that feed the soul. For Erin Benzakein, owner of Floret Flower Farm, that adage characterizes her business and her life.

"For me, flowers are about connecting with others, a way to enrich and add beauty to our daily lives," she says. A largely self-taught floral designer and entrepreneur, Benzakein—with the help of her family—transformed a rural property in Washington's scenic Skagit Valley into a 2-acre organic farm and multifaceted enterprise that includes a wholesale cut flower operation, design studio, seed company, and school.

The diverse array of annuals, perennials, and vegetables—some 250 varieties—that make their way into Benzakein's nature-inspired bouquets are determined by the seasons. Eleven greenhouses extend the growing season on either end, allowing Benzakein to bring her first flowers to market 6 weeks earlier than she would without greenhouses. Beginning with tissue-papery Iceland peonies, rainbow-hued ranunculus, and flamboyant parrot tulips and culminating with the last gasp of fall-blooming mums, flowers parade out of Floret

## "I LIKE TO COMBINE WILD-LOOKING MATERIALS WITH BIG, OVER-THE-TOP BLOOMS."

—ERIN BENZAKEIN

from early March until frost. Once harvested, the freshly cut flowers are delivered to regional grocery stores and wholesale flower outlets throughout the Pacific Northwest, Canada, and Alaska.

Benzakein's road to success as a farmer-florist (a term coined to describe the new wave of floral designers who grow their own materials) began with a moment that rekindled a childhood ritual. As a girl she spent summers with family in Walla Walla, Washington, at her great-grandparents' rural home, where Benzakein picked bunches of her great-grandmother's beloved heirloom sweet peas. "Grammy called me her little flower girl," Benzakein fondly recalls. "She was mainly bedridden, so I brought the garden inside to her."

Fast forward to 2002. Benzakein was working as a landscaper and she and her husband, Chris, were house hunting in the expensive Seattle market. They wound up in the Skagit Valley, an hour's drive north of the city, on 2 acres with a farmhouse and fertile soil in a picturesque region known for its mild maritime climate and expansive tulip fields.

Once settled, Benzakein poked around for ways to make money that would allow her to stay home with their two young children. She dabbled in cottage enterprises from growing and selling fresh vegetables to candle and soap making. "I didn't have a focus, so I tried a little bit of everything," she recalls.

In her first garden, Benzakein grew sweet peas, in honor of her late great-grandmother, and gave them away to friends and neighbors. When someone asked to buy a bouquet for a friend, Benzakein delivered the flowers herself. The recipient was overcome with gratitude, and in that moment of connection Benzakein knew the purpose she'd been searching for. She began planting flowers in earnest, and a business was born.

Benzakein's big break came when she was commissioned to supply 50 fresh bouquets weekly to Seattle area Whole Foods stores—a client she still has today. (Their stores in Oregon, Washington, and Canada carry her seasonal cut flowers.) "I devoured every book, video, and online blog I could find on floral design, and practiced like crazy!" she says, and soon began making arrangements for weddings and



Benzakein and her husband, Chris, grow trial varieties such as these unnamed asters for plant breeders—evaluating characteristics such as stem length, disease- and weather-resistance, vase life, and the best time to harvest.





01



02



03



04

attending a workshop given by floral designer Ariella Chetaz, known for her loose, playful style. She also looks up to designer Amy Merrick, who has foraged her materials from roadsides and abandoned lots. "I like to combine wild-looking materials with big over-the-top blooms such as parrot tulips and frilly decorative dahlias," Benzakein says. "I strive to capture the same richness of light and romanticism that's depicted in floral still life paintings of the old Dutch masters." She prefers sorbet tones of peach, salmon, coral, apricot, and buttercream found in varieties such as 'Cafe au Lait' dahlia, 'Salmon Rose' zinnia, and 'Dalmatian Peach' foxglove. "It's a warm, clean color palette that works in most settings, and is especially popular with brides," she says.

Daily operations are a family affair. Chris left his job as a mechanic to work full-time on the farm

managing field crews, shipping, and equipment maintenance. He also takes photos and updates the website ([floretflowers.com](http://floretflowers.com)). Benzakein's daughter, Elera, bunches flowers and cares for the ducks and chickens that keep slugs and other pests at bay. Her son, Jasper, helps with mechanical tasks such as repairing tractors and tends the family vegetable plot. A staff of up to seven assists with planting, harvesting, and office tasks, during the busiest months.

As the slow flower movement has blossomed, people hoping to break into the business look to Benzakein, whose blog describing the daily adventures of raising a family while running a farm has drawn a legion of devoted followers. In 2013 she cohosted her first design workshop in Philadelphia with Jennie Love, an East Coast farmer-forist and fellow blogger. The overwhelming response led Benzakein

01 Farm operations are a family affair. Here Benzakein's husband and children help harvest a patch of 'Salmon Rose' zinnias.

02 Ranunculus are among the earliest harvested flowers, with Pastel Mix being Benzakein's favorite. Stems are cut when the buds are halfway open, and blooms last up to 10 days in a vase.

03 Benzakein likes parrot tulips for their frilly petals, long stems, and vivid colors. 'Professor Rontgen' has huge flowers with indescent tangerine coloring that glows even on the dreariest of spring days.

04 The flowers of 'Rubenza' cosmos start out cranberry and fade to dusky mauve and chocolate in a transformation Benzakein calls "jaw dropping." She cuts stems with at least 3 to 5 buds when they begin to show color, allowing for up to a week of continuous bloom.

'Sahara' and 'Chim Chiminee' black-eyed Susans are harvested from midsummer through fall. The seasonal tones combine well in bouquets with sunflowers, zinnias, and other late-season bloomers.

to develop her own seminars to host on the farm. In 2016 she held seven weekend workshops sharing her lessons in the craft and business of farming with hobbyists and entrepreneurs from across the U.S., as well as Japan, Guatemala, and Australia.

"The business side was the most challenging aspect for me. It's one thing to learn how to grow and arrange flowers; it's another to transform that into a thriving business," she says. "We want attendees to leave our workshops feeling inspired and confident in all aspects—from growing, harvesting, and design, to the business and promotional end of things."

Benzakein's winding road from cottage farm to multifaceted enterprise continues to be shaped and expanded by the connections she makes through flowers. Her education projects turned into a book (*Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden*, Chronicle Books, March 2017), and her book led to a whole new business line, of specialty seeds.

"Many of the flowers I was growing from seed were only available wholesale; the publisher didn't want to include varieties that readers couldn't obtain, so we decided to sell them on our website." Floret now sells more than 100 seed varieties, with plans to add more. "We look for unique attributes; sweet peas such as 'Nimbus' and 'Blue Shift' were chosen for unusual coloring, longer stems, and big blooms. Chantilly Mix snapdragons have deeply ruffled flowers in subtle hues, with 3-foot-long stems and exceptional fragrance," Benzakein says.

A customized leather tool belt sold on the website similarly happened by chance and necessity. At a wedding gig in North Carolina, Benzakein received a tool belt made by local leather artist Wheeler Munroe ([wheelermunroe.com](http://wheelermunroe.com)). When friends asked where they could buy one for themselves, she contacted Munroe, and they developed a tool belt to sell at Benzakein's website.

More research and education are on the horizon for Floret. "Education is where my heart is. I like to problem solve and to try new things, and I'm happiest when I can share those discoveries with others," Benzakein explains. "No matter where my passion takes me, it will always involve flowers and helping others to make the world a more beautiful place."



"FLOWERS ENRICH AND ADD BEAUTY TO OUR LIVES."

—ERIN BENZAKEIN



## ERIN'S PRIZED PICKS

Plan your annual cut flower garden with help from one of the best farmer-florists in the country. Here's an easy-to-grow mix of some of Benzakein's favorite hardworking cutting garden plants.



- BED 1** Ammi majus 'Graceland' (12) •  
Ammi visnago 'Green Mist' (12) •  
2 rows, 12 inch spacing
- BED 2** Bells of Ireland (12) •  
Amaranth Chocolate & Cherry Mix (12) •  
4 rows, 12 inch spacing
- BED 3** Scobiosa 'Salmon Queen' (20) •  
Snapdragon Chantilly Mix (20) •  
5 rows, 9 inch spacing
- BED 4** Zinnia 'Zinderella Peach' (20) •  
Zinnia 'Salmon Rose' (20) •  
5 rows, 9 inch spacing
- BED 5** Cosmos Double Click Mix (20) •  
Love in a Mist Starry Night Mix (20) •  
5 rows, 9 inch spacing
- BED 6** 'Nimbus' sweet pea (12) •  
'Valerie Harrod' sweet pea (12) •  
2 rows along trellis, 6 inch spacing
- BED 7** Celosia Supercrest Mix (20) •  
Phlox 'Cherry Caramel' (20) •  
5 rows, 9 inch spacing
- BED 8** Dahlias: 'Crichton Honey' (2),  
'Snoho Doris' (2), 'Punkin Spice' (2),  
'Valley Rust Bucket' (2), 'Comet' (2),  
'Terracotta' (2) •  
3 rows, 18 inch spacing
- Plant outdoors after last frost
  - Plant outdoors one month after last frost

### RIGHT START

Erin's tips for getting your flower garden going.

#### GET TO KNOW YOUR FROST CYCLE

Learn your area's average last and first frost dates. This affects when you start seeds, and allows you to plan varieties that will grow into autumn.

#### START SEEDS EARLY

Try to start your seeds indoors about 4 to 6 weeks before the average last frost to give your plants a jump start on the season. The plants will fill in faster and cut down on weeds. At Floret, roughly 90 percent of the plants are started inside a greenhouse (if you don't have a greenhouse use a covered seed tray indoors under growing lights).

#### DON'T FORGET FILLERS

Grow foliage and filler plants for arrangements (things like amaranth and bells of Ireland). Plant roughly half the garden with fillers.

#### DO A SOIL TEST

One of the most important steps in setting up a garden is doing a soil test. To collect soil samples, dig a hole 1 foot deep, gather a few tablespoons, then repeat throughout your garden until a quart-sized jar is full. You can send your soil to a testing lab like the UMass Soil and Plant Nutrient Testing Laboratory ([soiltest.umass.edu](http://soiltest.umass.edu)) and use the result to amend your soil before planting.

#### PLANT DENSELY

For a productive garden, and to encourage longer stems (better for floral design), plant flowers close together. This will reduce weeds and increase the number of flowers you produce. Give them the proper amendment, fertilizer, and water.

ILLUSTRATION BY HELEN LARSON

PHOTO: BENZAKEIN, JOSH ENGINES

Floral designers favor the rich chocolate, rose, and burgundy tones of 'Sahara' black-eyed Susan. Seed packets featuring line drawing illustrations by Olympic Peninsula artist Nina Sajesko are available at [floretflowers.com](http://floretflowers.com).



special events, developing a signature style she describes as "lushly abundant yet slightly wild."

Benzakein always knew she wanted to serve the local market. "We really believe in that," she says. While some 20 percent of all cut flowers and greens sold in the U.S. are grown domestically, small-scale farmers such as Benzakein are pioneering a slow flower movement, which aims to soften the industry's environmental footprint by growing and selling within the same region.

Benzakein expanded her wholesale base to include florists, wedding planners, and co-ops throughout the Pacific Northwest—staying within 120 miles of Floret; demand was so great that the flowers sold out as soon as they became available. The family looked for ways to expand their acreage, but logistics proved daunting. "We found other ways to expand the business without expanding our physical footprint," Benzakein says. They refocused their efforts on intensive farming practices such as succession planting, higher-yield crops, and innovative harvesting techniques to increase productivity on their existing land.

As the business grew, Benzakein honed her craft,

A leather tool belt—also for sale on Floret Flower Farms' website—was designed by North Carolina leather artist Wheeler Munroe to hold in-the-field go-to items including heavy-duty pruning shears, flower snips, pens, and a cellphone.

