

DOWN ON THE FARM

From growing a few sweet peas on her plot to breeding her own cultivars, Erin Benzakein has grown Floret into one of the most respected flower farms in the USA

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This image An as yet unnamed dahlia cultivar that the team at Floret has been working on for a couple of years, pouring a lot of energy into breeding open-centred dahlias that also last well in the vase.

Facing page Erin Benzakein, the face of the farm, harvesting bucketfuls of her farm-bred flowers.

Getting nowhere with requests for unusual colours and forms, they taught themselves how to breed new flower cultivars

This image Alongside its own breeding programme, Floret grows several established cultivars, such as this *Verbascum* 'Southern Charm'.

Facing page Bringing seed of a new cultivar to market can take more than seven years from the initial discovery of a standout flower. In this area of the two-acre farm, Erin and her team are observing and documenting rows of dahlias as part of the breeding programme.

Among cut-flower growers, Floret Flower Farm is a household name. This US flower farm and seed company, based in Washington State, is a pioneer in the seasonal flower movement. It's the vision of Erin Benzakein, who with her husband Chris (the man responsible for Floret's stunning photography and videos) and her committed team, has dedicated the past 15 years to learning and sharing all there is know about growing cut flowers.

When she first started selling flower bouquets at a local grocery store in 2008, Erin struggled to find anywhere to turn for information. "It feels like a kind of impossible way to make a living if you are not really creative and used to failing," she says. Although she had some experience working with a landscaping crew, the former nanny was self-taught when it came to growing cut flowers, beginning with just a few rows of sweet peas in her vegetable garden.

Eventually, cut flowers replaced the vegetables, and after Floret was born in 2009, more and more of the family farm was given over to cut flowers. In 2014, they started offering seeds, with the idea that small-scale flower farmers and gardeners should have access to the same great cultivars as professional growers. At one point, Floret was offering more than 300 varieties for sale, with a percentage of these being produced on the farm as seed crops.

However, Erin soon realised there was a disconnect between what big seed companies were offering and what the end user wanted. After getting nowhere with requests for more unusual colours and forms, she enlisted the help of Eric Budzynski, a seed specialist with a decade's experience working on vegetable seed farms. Together the pair set about teaching themselves how to breed new flower cultivars, with a clear set of goals to help them narrow down their selection.

Plants needed to thrive in a range of climates, particularly hot and humid ones. They also needed to be vigorous and healthy, so even new growers would have success. Their criteria for cutting flowers included: long stems; nuanced, beautiful colouring; and forms that lent themselves to natural-style floristry. Erin wanted to give local growers an advantage over imported blooms by focusing on breeding flowers that don't ship well. "So if floral designers or wholesale flower sellers wanted to get their hands on them, they would have to buy them locally or learn how to grow their own," says Erin.

It takes seven years from the initial discovery of a standout flower selected for breeding to a stable new cultivar that is ready for market. In the first year, only five to ten per cent of the seeds sown from a cross will come true. The rest have to be removed, which is known as roguing. Then flies or bees are introduced to work on pollinating the keepers. This process is then repeated for five years until the crop is 90 per cent true to type.

The next step is to bulk it up for seed production, which takes another two years. Winter is spent ▷



▷ planning which lines to develop, as even with Floret's 80 polytunnels and more than 100 isolation cages, space is precious. Spring for Erin is about sowing all the seeds of the next generation and the summer is a daily round of diligent roguing.

"The reason that choice is limited is simply because people don't know how to breed their own varieties and save seed," she says. It is her strong belief that if she shares what she has learned, others will be encouraged to have a go and contribute their findings, and there will be a lot more information out there for everyone to benefit from. This starts with a free mini course, which will help growers save seed from the new zinnia, celosia and dahlia cultivars (known as the Floret Originals) the Floret team has made available this year. Erin intends to cover in-depth information about the differences between open-pollinated and hybrid cultivars, the isolation distances required to ensure that cultivars come back true to type, and instructions on how to go about harvesting and cleaning seeds on a home scale. Many of these resources

Erin has created come from a desire to share all she has learned and stop people making the mistakes she did. In addition to three best-selling books, a website packed with practical advice and video courses, Floret recently introduced a comprehensive digital library with detailed profiles of more than 1,500 unique cut-flower cultivars.

Erin and her team are also working on the next generation of seeds, "honing in and isolating the very best and most unusual forms and colours from those mixes". I'm excited to be trialling all 26 of these at my own flower farm, Green & Gorgeous in Oxfordshire, and can't wait to cut and arrange with them. No doubt I will save some seed and, empowered by Erin's advice and encouragement, I might even turn my hand to breeding myself some day soon. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Floret at floretfloret.com
A limited selection of Floret Originals seeds are available in the UK from milliproust.com/floret

This image Erin's adopted stray cat Timmy waits for her outside one of Floret's greenhouses, which are filled with individual isolation cages, used to ensure new zinnia cultivars come true. Facing page A selection of some of the dahlias, zinnias and celosias that Floret has developed as part of its breeding programme. Its new collections have evocative names such as Glowing Embers, Spun Sugar, Cancan Girls, Golden Hour and Precious Metals.

