

Sign of the Times

The Power of a Flower

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBIN STEIN

THIS COUNTRY IS IN THE MIDST of a floral revolution. Perhaps you haven't noticed, given other events, but over the past several years, flower arrangements have become wilder and stranger, incorporating all manner of seasonal flora plucked from the woods, the garden, the roadside and the vegetable patch. You are now more likely to see a bouquet laden with sheathes of grass, arching vines of clematis, Fritillaria bulbs and flowering purple basil than just a polite cluster of roses or calla lilies. Big deal, you think. Well, it is. Allow me to explain why.

On just the level of style, these arrangements — loose and fluid and highlighting the beauty of their individual elements — are a vast improvement over the less fortunate floral trends we've suffered through: Recall those fads such as stems held in bondage by swathes of foliage, or tight mounds in which the blossoms just barely scaled the edge of the vase, or Pop Art installations in which bright blooms were used for nothing more than Crayola-like graphic patterns. If you consider the materials those florists were working with, it's analogous to chefs cooking only with canned fruit and out of season tomatoes. In the current floral industrial complex, everything we admire about a fresh flower — the fragrance, the delicate structure, the fleeting beauty and connection to season and place — is bred out so that the flower can be inexpensive, long lasting and easily shippable. Most of our cut flowers are imported from Latin America, where labor is cheap, working conditions harsh, regulations lax and chemicals prevalent — and that's just the growing part. Then, after being jacked up on fungicide, dunked in vats of preservatives and jostled and manhandled for about a week, these odorless, uniform, sturdy flowers with their enormous carbon footprint come to rest in our florist's hands or in our homes. Nice.

Not so for the ground soldiers of today's movement, who have quietly just said no to such bland offerings. These revolutionaries are



WILD AT HEART A new breed of florist is abandoning mass-produced flowers for arrangements incorporating seasonal flora, like a pink frost hellebore or a narcissus bulb.

florists and flower farmers, mostly women, mostly in their 30s, at the vanguard of a sensibility that has developed into a cultish lifestyle movement with the power to affect this system. In simply being drawn to working with the rich diversity found in nature — ferns still unfurling, wildflowers, old roses (all hard to find, especially from the wholesale market) — they began talking to each other, finding sources, farmers, foragers, pressuring the wholesalers to supply better things, who in turn pressure their growers to grow better things. Nearly all of them teach workshops, often with each other. Despite being competitors, they have developed networks to support each other, a floral sisterhood or hive mind.

A preference for wilder arrangements and fresh-from-the-garden

or woodland-floor flowers is not new, of course. The 20th-century British designer Constance Spry incorporated weeds, seed pods and kale into arrangements for clients like the Queen of England and the Duke of Windsor. And the small but influential '80s and early '90s Manhattan flower shop Madderlake was known for casual bouquets mixed with things like roadside-harvested chicory and dandelion accented with squash blossoms. But until now, great style did not a movement make.

The crucial difference? Instagram, the Gutenberg of visual imagery — especially FOMO-inducing lifestyle pictures. One photo of buckets of sweet peas or fields of bearded irises at a time, these florists and farmers are spreading a sophisticated aesthetic and an ecological consciousness like so much kudzu in the hearts and minds of a devoted and ever-exploding audience. There seems to have been a perfect storm brewing, particularly among meaning-searching millennials dissatisfied with their cubicle jobs, ready to either overthrow their nascent careers for farm work or floristry or to simply fantasize about doing so. The irony, of course, is that digital media turns out to be the ultimate propaganda machine for a way of living that harks back to simpler times.

One of the superstars of this movement, the Skagit Valley-based flower farmer Erin Benzakein, of Floret Farm — whose upcoming classes sold out just minutes after she posted them and whose book, "Cut Flower Garden," out this month, had the highest presale numbers her publisher has ever seen — is responsible for inspiring a burgeoning generation to change their lives and take up farming. "Women fall to their knees crying in her workshops," says the Brooklyn-based florist-turned-farmer Sarah Ryhanen of Saipua, another leader in the movement. Benzakein's popularity, and the growing obsession with picking up the spade or the secateurs, taps into

GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT The Utah-based floral designer Sarah Winward's meandering bouquet of peonies, Russian olive berries and milkweed pods. Below: buckets of bearded irises grown at Sarah Ryhanen's flower farm in upstate New York.



what Ryhanen sees as a deep longing for a connection to the natural world. As she explains it, Homo sapiens have only been living apart from the earth for less than five generations, and the detachment from it is becoming stressful. "For 500 generations, we farmed the land," Ryhanen says, "and for thousands of generations before that, we were hunter-gatherers. Imprinted in our brains is a real desire for nature, and it's causing anxiety."

With social media, women like Ryhanen and Benzakein can speak to each other and directly to their customers, bypassing the middlemen and traditional media, quickly changing not just ideas and styles but the market itself in ways that

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would have taken months or years in the past — if it happened at all. A farmer can now ask a florist friend to try to popularize what is a good crop for her — the zinnia, say — because an influential florist can create a frenzy for a flower just by posting an arrangement that includes it. Likewise, a florist can speak directly to a farmer friend asking her to grow more of what she wants, like the newly desirable rusty-hued ranunculus. This ultimately increases the likelihood that the chain of what's bred and how it's raised and where it's grown will be a boon for our farmers, our landscape and our economy.

It's like a David and Goliath story, with something as lovely and fragile as a flower upending big business. This revolution might be pastoral and pretty, but it's also powerful. ■