



CHAPTER THREE

creating a legacy one seed at a time

Featuring Floret Flowers

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Working as a husband and wife team has presented its challenges, but Chris and Erin have learned they can't just walk away from a problem. They have made the decision to brush off frustrations and keep in constant communication.



During a visit to Skagit Valley, Washington, one would be lucky to stumble across a small but mighty two acres of land that has blossomed, quite literally, into a prospering farm, design studio, and learning center that has impacted farmers, florists, entrepreneurs, and dreamers both nationally and internationally.

ERIN AND CHRIS Benzakein of Floret Flowers created such a place from the simple desire to start growing their food and move away from the limits of the city. Erin dreamt for her children Elora and Jasper to have the freedom to roam and explore the magic of nature surrounded by animals, and to gain some lessons in hard work along the way.

When farm living became a reality, it was as though the Benzakeins had stepped onto the set of *The Little House on the Prairie*. Elora and Jasper were homeschooled and enjoyed the delight of sleeping in late and rolling out of bed to wander outside and tend to the farm animals in their jammies. Erin immediately carved out a spot on their plot of land to start growing their very own fresh food. She was finally living out her dream and started with a garden of asparagus, raspberries, and other various vegetables, but it only took a couple of rows of sweet pea flowers to set her family on a new venture.

When the sweet pea flowers flourished, Erin began to give them to family and friends. Her unique style, in which her flowers appeared to be growing out from the vase with a natural, wild, and romantic guise captured the hearts of many. Word quickly spread, and soon enough people were ordering jars of her blooms. Hand-delivering her first bouquet turned out to be more rewarding than she ever imagined. When Erin anxiously knocked on the door of her first customer, she would never forget how the woman embraced and breathed in the fragrant buds. Tears instantly welled up in the woman's eyes, and at that moment a deeper purpose took root in Erin's heart—she had found her niche. Her road to becoming a “farmer-florist”—a term coined for combining both the love of floral design and farming—had begun.

What started as a couple of rows of sweet peas has now turned into an array of gorgeous flowers with over 200 varieties of Dahlias ranging from a simple button size bloom to a majestic dinner plate show stopper. The pigment of the Dahlias are eye-catching, to say the least; they can bloom in blush pink, firework red, pale yellow, orange, and even a juicy plum. At Floret Flowers they also have over 100 varieties of seeds, and Erin can trial different plants and bulbs for seed breeders and offer her feedback.

When the rooster crows, Erin and Chris are awake and ready to start their busy day; the first thing on the agenda is a cup of coffee and then a quick pow-wow with a special group of ladies they call “Team Floret.” Everyone has an assigned task, from tending to the plants and filling orders to delivering items to

the city and working on irrigation. Erin focuses on planning and strategy, which involves working on her upcoming book as well as blogging, researching, and marketing. Chris, who is known as the “flow” maker, is the source of constant support and innovation. Before the farm came to fruition, he was a mechanic for many years, and the tools he's developed have proven to be crucial. When things break or don't go as planned, he never fails to have a solution or offer a new perspective. Working as a husband and wife team has presented its challenges, but Chris and Erin have learned they can't just walk away from a problem. They have made the decision to brush off frustrations and keep in constant communication. There was a learning curve to discovering who was in charge. But ultimately, they learned to divide and conquer, always making bigger decisions together.

When business began to take-off, they both had to challenge their introverted tendencies—especially when they started doing workshops for both floral design and small scale, high intensity, flower production. Erin had begun taking online photography classes, and Chris was learning over her shoulder. Soon enough, Chris was branching out of his shell, capturing breathtaking photos of their farm life and even telling others how to pose for portrait pictures at their workshops. There were many times Chris and Erin would stop and just look at each other, wondering if what was happening was real. And while Chris was mastering the art of working the camera, Erin was learning to get out from behind the scenes to be the face of the business.

Erin began to realize that getting word out about their farm didn't take a fancy logo or business card; instead, what made an impact was inviting people into their day-to-day lives by making herself present in photos or giving glimpses into the magic that happened on their farm. Individuals who wanted to learn more began to see the heart the Benzakein's had for educating others on not only how they did things but how others could do it, too. Requests began to flood in, and Floret Flowers began to take it all on, dipping into several ventures at once—weddings, workshops, publishing a book, photography, trialing seeds and more.

Elora and Jasper were both flourishing as well—as the farm grew, they grew with it. Both of them are aware of and often laugh at how different their lives are from the other kids at school. Farm living has given them a profound appreciation for the freedom to roam but also a strong work ethic that has shown them how both adventure and perseverance can lead to great things. Jasper has grown to have an entrepreneurial spirit and will often shadow Chris, learning the ropes. Over time, he has developed a knack for being an innovator by watching how other vendors conduct business. Elora has also developed impressive talents as she is editing Erin's upcoming book, “Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden.” But one of her passions continues to be tending to the farm's many animals, including 20 chickens, all of them being rare heirloom breeds—Sherbet, Josephine, Chester, and Big Mama are just a few of their names.

With the kids growing into their own, Erin and Chris began to realize they were being stretched too thin. With encouragement from a family friend, they began to re-prioritize what they



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wanted to do. They decided to set aside amazing pieces of what they offered to focus on the things that lit them up—teaching, sharing, and trialing seeds on the farm. Erin's desire is to share with others the many lessons her garden has taught her. She wants to demystify the seemingly complex ideas of farming and break processes down into pieces that anyone would feel comfortable conquering. Chris and Erin have learned not to cut corners and that you get out what you put in; they have cracked the code on how to create a thriving farm and business and the goal they share is to help others do the same.

A determined researcher at heart, Erin won't stop until she has tried everything; her strong will and a healthy obsession for what she does drives results. The next quest Erin is about to embark on is discovering flowers that follow the current wedding trends. She wants to find dusty rose and creamy white colors that are rare—she also wouldn't mind officially naming a flower along the way. Erin has learned to start where she is at instead of waiting for things to fit together perfectly. Along

the way of growing in her business, she has taught herself not to be discouraged by failure but to look at it from a different perspective, and when she does her failures turn into a gift of learning.

Floret Flowers is a dreamlike landscape where assortments of breathtaking, colorful blooms cover the landscape. An old and worn white pickup truck is found driving up and down the rows of their fairytale farm capturing the pure essence of true grit. Erin and Chris have cultivated a place that offers hope and a new perspective to farmers, florists, business owners and dreamers. It all started with a simple dream of planting deep roots in the open country, and that humble dream remains even as the heart of Chris and Erin grows deeper and wider. Their every desire is to continue to share and give others the tools they need to create their own majestic garden, no matter how big or small—and maybe even learn a few life lessons along the way. ♦

