





Sweet peas grow in coral, pink, violet, purple, and other varieties in Erin Benzakein's garden. A greenhouse protects them from wind and harsh swings in temperature.

RISK TAKER

ERIN BENZAKEIN

A SIMPLE QUESTION ABOUT
HER GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S
PASSION FOR FLOWERS SET
THIS WASHINGTON WOMAN
ON A PATH THAT YIELDED
THE UNEXPECTED.

story by SARAH WOLF

photography by CHRIS BENZAKEIN and JOY PROUTY

Erin has wrapped together her limitless sense of curiosity, memories of her dear great-grandmother, and the heart of a risk taker to create a thriving business—where she gets to work with flowers all day long. What's not to love? —Jo

So many solutions and hidden dreams are born of a simple problem. For Erin Benzakein it began with her inability to find the flowers she remembered so fondly from her great-grandmother's garden, and with a question: Why was it so hard to get those beloved blooms?

Grammy, as Erin called her, was something of a garden legend. She'd built her plot, "one wheelbarrow-load of soil at a time," Erin says, on a patch of barren land in the Nevada desert. Its fences were laced with morning glories, and its flowerbeds brimmed with blossoms.

By the time Erin came into Grammy's life, that Nevada garden had long been left behind. Grammy was bedridden and living in eastern Washington. "She often sent me outside with scissors to pick her a bouquet," Erin says. Young Erin took this task very seriously as she snipped snapdragons, tea roses, and sweet peas to put at Grammy's bedside. They always smelled like ambrosia, and her great-grandmother found so much joy in their beauty. Those summers in the country left an indelible impression on Erin.

Recapturing that garden magic as an adult—one with a new home and a patch of yard set aside for a garden—proved elusive. Erin had been scouring flower shops and other sources for "old-fashioned flowers" (a catchall term for blooms that are fragrant, ruffled, and more delicate in nature than commercially available flowers), and she kept hitting dead ends.

“Almost everyone I’d talk to was growing the same run-of-the-mill flowers,” she says. They were sturdy sunflowers, for instance, and long-legged roses in plastic-wrapped bundles. “None were very beautiful or magical,” Erin says, “and I was so attracted to things from the past, romantic flowers with these beautiful scents to them. There was a disconnect between these dreamy, nostalgic flowers and what was grown commercially.”

Her search led her to the local library where she checked out every single book, article, and paper about old-fashioned flowers. “Our local library has a 100-book limit on what you can check out,” Erin says, “and whenever I’m learning something new, I hit that limit.”

Erin finally found answers to why her beloved sweet peas were nearly impossible to find at a florist. “Something like 80 percent of all flowers here in the U.S. are imported, mostly from South America,” she says.

By the time these cut flowers are harvested and shipped to the United States, they’ve been without water for a week. “They’re not bred for color, beauty, fragrance, or movement; they’re bred to withstand being in a box,” Erin says. No wonder tea roses, foxgloves, dahlias, and sweet peas weren’t sold commercially—none of them could survive such a brutal journey.

Erin went back to the library to research old-fashioned flowers

that would work well as cut blooms and that would also prosper in Washington’s generally mild, wet weather. And not just any flower would do.

“They had to be beautiful,

make people’s hearts ache, and bring back memories,” Erin says, her voice wistful. Armed with her book knowledge, she headed into the garden. “I did a number of different trials and tested hundreds of varieties to find just a handful of treasures,” Erin says.

And as she tried and tested, something magical took root. The soil and seeds shared their secrets. Certain types of sweet peas,

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Text



such as the 'Charlie's Angel' and 'Jilly' varieties, proved ideal for cutting. And plenty of other flowers, like the papery poppy and the ruffled ranunculus, flourished when blended into a bouquet.

Today, Erin is the founder and owner of Floret, a family flower farm in Washington's Skagit Valley. It started, as gardens do, as small as a seed: just a tiny patch of sweet peas alongside a larger vegetable garden. It has grown into a pioneering purveyor of all things fresh and floral. Ten years in, Floret produces fresh-cut blooms for florists across the Pacific Northwest and mail-order seed packets for folks farther away, plus online workshops, a newsy blog, and a textbook, *Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden*, on growing your own cut flowers. It's a business that sustains the Benzakein family and their 12 other employees. And it all started with a simple question and a willing student eager to dig up the answers.

"A million times, yes, I'm a naturally curious person," Erin says. She credits her curiosity not only with sprouting the farm but also nurturing its every aspect. For example, when the farm was just a seedling—Erin's hobby while she raised two young children—"I just did what I wanted and avoided what I was scared of," she says. She was mostly afraid of the business side of a commercial farm, especially marketing it so that others might buy its bounty.

"But as things got bigger and bigger, those holes in my knowledge got bigger too," she says, "and if you want something to go from a hobby to a real business that can sustain you, your family, and hopefully some employees, you have to be willing to look at the whole picture." Erin approached her fear with the same curiosity that got the whole garden growing in the first place: She devoured books on marketing. She adapted the advice she found to suit her personality and approach to relationships.

"I like to think of marketing like filling a bird feeder: If done right, the birds come to you. I brought that same curiosity to an area where I was terrified and clueless, and it not only impacted our business but thousands of others too." Erin shares what she learns so that others can grow gardens, market businesses, and tell their own stories.

And that's by design. "Our team motto is that we're not cool—we're nice," Erin says. "Everyone is invited to join us, and you don't have to be cool, and you don't have to know what you're doing to participate. Comparison and isolation are some of the biggest killers of creativity."

This let's-figure-it-out-together attitude keeps Floret and its ever-curious, always-asking-questions proprietor blooming. "Following my curiosity opened all these doors to a whole different life path," Erin says.

Sourcebook on page 110.

Above left: The flower fields are a cacophony of color and also the picture of organization with lavender 'Smokey Eyes' larkspur, spiky foxglove, snapdragons, and sweet peas.
Left: 'Sherwood's Peach' dahlias are absolute stunners—each bloom is nearly as big as the harvesting bucket!