

# THE LUSH LIFE



On her two-acre farm in the Skagit Valley of Washington State, *Erin Benzakein* of *Floret* grows organic flowers, designs romantic arrangements, hosts workshops, and writes openly and honestly about her experiences as a farmer-florist, entrepreneur, and working mother of two. No wonder her business is blossoming.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIELA HERMAN | TEXT BY MELISSA OZAWA





## Floret

2014 DESIGN WINNER

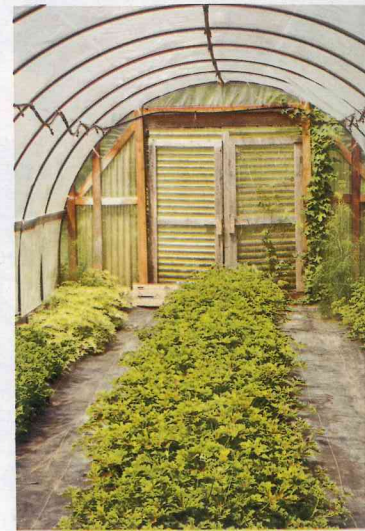
Erin Benzakein  
Mount Vernon, Wash.  
[floretflowers.com](http://floretflowers.com)

Floret is a family farm and floral-design studio specializing in handcrafted organic arrangements for weddings and other special events.

## TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL

"I love walking in the garden first for inspiration. I like to see how closely I can mimic in the vase what I find there," she says. In this tall glass urn, she started with a base of copper beech and nine-bark branches, anchored by a large flower frog, before adding 'Coral Charm' peonies, 'Ghislaine de Féligonde' roses, sweet peas, nasturtiums, raspberries, and *Sanguisorba*.  
Opposite: Benzakein builds an arrangement with white and yellow peonies, roses, and foxgloves.






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## LONGING FOR A QUIET, SIMPLER LIFE, ERIN BENZAKEIN AND HER FAMILY MOVED OUT OF SEATTLE 14 YEARS AGO AND RELOCATED TO A FARM 60 MILES NORTH OF THE CITY.

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A few years later, with two small children in tow, she wanted to start a business that allowed her to work from home. She had been a gardener all her life, so she began by growing vegetables, then heirloom apple trees, and she eventually even tried raising chickens. Nothing, sadly, was quite right. It wasn't until she planted a double row of sweet peas to honor her great-grandmother that she found her calling. She grew an abundance of blooms in her organic garden that first year and started offering some for sale. "When I handed my first customer a bouquet, she took a big sniff and started to cry, remembering her own grandmother's love of sweet peas," she recalls. "That's when I knew I had found something I really wanted to do with my life."

She still struggled, however, with how to turn her love of flowers into a profitable business. She pulled images of floral arrangements she liked from magazines and began making her own. "Yet it never occurred to me to cut flowers from my garden for them. I somehow had disconnected the

two—gardening and flower-arranging—thinking that flowers for arrangements came from a store. Isn't that funny?" she laughs. Once she made the connection, she gave herself permission to cut (and cut and cut) from her garden. Her local Whole Foods loved the bouquets she sent there and asked for more. So she ripped out the vegetables, found homes for most of the chickens, and started growing flowers as a business. "I quickly went from a backyard gardener to a farmer," she said. And Floret was born.

She began documenting her experience on her website, [floretoflowers.com](http://floretoflowers.com). "We discussed the blog as a family, since the kids are so intimately involved with the farm. We had to make sure they were comfortable being a part of the blog, too," she says. Photographs of Benzakein; her husband, Chris; and their kids working in the fields fill the blog, as do pictures of gorgeous arrangements and rows of blooms in the evening sun. But life on a farm is not always a bed of roses (even when that's one of your crops). Benzakein writes honestly about the difficulties of being a working mom





and farmer—the exhaustion, the insecurities, the failures, even the piles of dirty laundry. This candor has endeared her to her fans (she now has more than 66,000 Instagram followers) and propelled her as the voice and face of the growing farmer-florist movement. But her openness does not end there. She shares the work of her colleagues, frequently writing about other designers and growers. She also hosts multiday workshops at the farm; this year's six classes are already sold out.

Today, the farm thrums with activity year-round. Floret has densely packed its two acres—comprising 11 hoop houses, a heated greenhouse, and open growing fields—with flowers. Chris now works full-time on the farm, and Benzakein has hired more staff to help with orders, planting, and harvesting. Even so, “during the flowers season, we consider it a marathon,” she says. They are up before dawn and are often toiling until after the sun sets. Benzakein also creates arrangements for weddings and special events, sells seeds, and is looking to expand into shipping flowers nationally. Life on the farm might not exactly be quiet or simple, but she wouldn't trade any of it. “We're living in the middle of a fairyland,” she says. “To walk out your back door and see towering rows of sweet peas—it's pretty magical being surrounded by beauty all day.”

## FIELDS OF DREAMS

*From left: Snapdragons grow in rows on the farm. Benzakein builds a pink-and-green bouquet with bells of Ireland, honeysuckle, campanula, Queen Anne's lace, dianthus, Saponaria, and a single peony: “My goal is to make my bouquets look like they're growing,” she says. Opposite, clockwise from left: Benzakein began with just a couple of rows of sweet peas, and today she grows 50 varieties—*

*“They're still my favorite flower,” she says—and offers sweet-pea seeds for sale. Benzakein plants seedlings in one of the hoop houses. She builds an arrangement in a low-footed bowl, using a flower frog and chicken wire for support. The hoop houses help extend the growing season. On delivery days, her husband, Chris, leaves before 4 a.m. to beat the traffic; when he returns, he puts in a full day on the farm.*





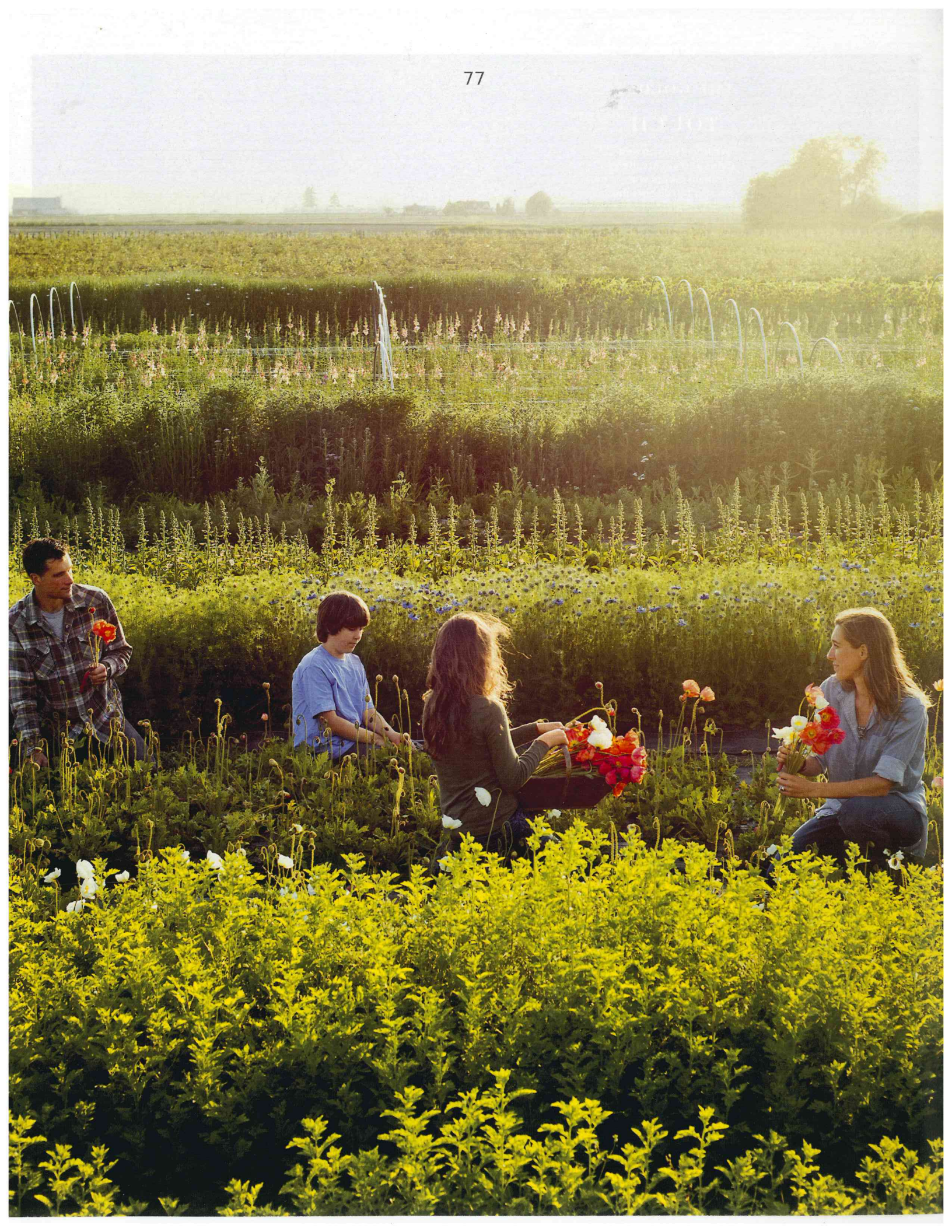
## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Jasper, 12, and Elora, 15, help their parents pick Icelandic poppies. For the past five years, Benzakein has been writing about their life on her blog. She and Chris take all of the photographs. "The family has been on board since the beginning, but it's nerve-racking," she says. "You're really making yourself vulnerable." Her honesty has connected her with many people around the world. "We've developed a great online community of growers and designers. Everyone is so generous. There is nothing off-limits."

## IN FULL FLOURISH

Sky-blue delphiniums, coral Icelandic poppies, and salmon-pink sweet peas are the stars of this abundant arrangement housed in a galvanized French flower bucket. Benzakein extols the merits of buying domestically grown flowers. Not only is it more eco-friendly (less fuel is needed for shipping, and imported flowers often use more chemical fertilizers and pesticides than ones grown in the U.S.), but it helps to support small family farmers and keep money in the local economy. Plus, they're fresher. "It's just a win-win situation," she says.







## THE GOLDEN TOUCH

### THINK PINK

During the growing season, Benzakein offers several flower-arranging workshops at the farm. Students are given access to cut whatever blooms they want from the fields: "We try to think of the farm as a living classroom," she says.

Here, she has combined garden roses, peonies, astrantia, sweet peas, ninebark, copper beech, and *Sanguisorba* in varying shades of red and pink for an exuberant, romantic arrangement.

While working on weddings and events, Benzakein meets with the client to discuss the color palette. For this yellow-and-white arrangement, she packed a tall glass vase with peonies, foxgloves, chamomile, Icelandic poppies, 'Chislaine de Féligonde' and 'Windrush' roses, sweet peas, and blueberries.

When she's not working on events or workshops, Benzakein is busy with a new challenge: writing a book about growing and arranging flowers, which is due out in the fall of 2016.





