



PHOTOS OF ERIN BY CHRIS BENZAKEIN

The first spring after we bought our house I went immediately to work planting a massive vegetable garden, an heirloom orchard and turning the surrounding acre of lawn into an English-style flower garden. Old roses scrambling up arbors, huge perennial borders spilling over with colorful blooms, flowering bulbs, interesting shrubs, vines scrambling up the house—I had it all. But taking clippers to my “perfect” display garden was absolute torture. Somehow it seemed the flowers weren’t actually meant to be cut and enjoyed up close, but were rather intended to stay out on the plant and lend their energy to the overall display in the yard. Friends would grab snips when they visited to make a little bouquet for the dinner table and I’d break out into a cold sweat, oftentimes following behind them and hovering as they harvested. Nothing like a little scarcity while swimming in such abundance!

But as time went by, I loosened up and started seeing things in a new light. More and more flowers from the garden found their way into friends’ hands, homes and even a few weddings for neighbors and strangers in need. Seeing how much joy the flowers brought to others and witnessing the intensely positive emotions they triggered was absolutely humbling. By the end of the first growing season I had done a complete turnaround as I gave up a majority of our veggie patch and transformed it into a well-stocked cutting garden. Almost daily you could find me with clippers in hand harvesting blooms at their peak with no regard for the outdoor display. Within a short time the flowing perennial borders, orchard and green lawn came out to make way for a large hoop house and more rows of blooms. The next season

I tilled up part of the neighbor’s horse pasture and started my little business, Floret. The season following, my tiny plot grew and soon our bouquets were being carried in Whole Foods stores throughout the Seattle area.

Nowadays you can find me in the flowers from sunup until the day is through, for all of the warm months of the year. We just finished our tenth hoop house and currently have two full acres of field in production. It’s amazing what can happen with a little perspective change and a whole lot of love and hard work. The minute a visitor steps onto the property now, I whip pruners out of my pocket at lightening speed and send them out to pick straight away.

Sharing flowers is one of my all-time favorite things to do. From handing off an ultra-romantic bridal bouquet, to setting out lush centerpieces at a wedding; from unloading an overflowing van full of bouquets and bunches for a grocery store, to taking a sweet gift arrangement to friends—it all brings me enormous joy. I often hear from others that they’d love to learn how to arrange flowers and bring more of nature indoors but don’t have a full field of blooms just outside their backdoor to work from. I’m always happy to share this addictive bug of giving flowers with others—to lift the veil and share some of my favorite ingredients and tricks.

Collect Containers

Look for containers that accentuate your flowers but aren’t family heirlooms that need to be returned. I love tea tins, Irish oatmeal containers, soup cans with vintage-looking labels and old



canning jars. Before using any of the metal tins, check that they are water tight. If not, run a thin bead of caulk inside each seam and leave overnight to dry. For containers with a wide opening such as a soup can or tea tin, you'll also want to insert a ball of chicken wire into the vase to help hold up weightier stems.

Think Foliage

You don't need a big flower garden to cut from in order to have bouquets in the house or to share flowers all season long. For most arrangements, I rely on foliage for roughly 70 percent of the

total volume. This approach really stretches the floral bounty and will introduce you to a whole world of unexpected ingredients.

The vegetable garden is a great place to start your hunt! Ingredients like parsley flowers, bolted cilantro, snow peas on the vine, kale, fava beans on the stem, nasturtium vines, scented geraniums, herbs both as foliage and in flower, leek or onion blossoms and even pole beans are all long-lasting additions to a bouquet.

"Weeds" are another often overlooked source of bulk material. Dock, grasses, flax, cress, wild Queen Anne's lace and almost all winter cover crops like rye, wheat, field peas, oats and barley



work great! Unripe fruit on the branch or vine is a real conversation starter and awesome filler as well. My favorites include crabapples (with leaves removed), unripe raspberries, Italian plums and currant tomatoes.

Create a Space

Having a nice space set up and stocked with supplies really does make the process flow. A decent-sized table, a few buckets, some good clippers, a few chicken wire balls and something to elevate your arrangement while working should all be in the arsenal. I found a few large chunks of wood in the scrap piles that are perfect for elevating my arrangements to eye level. When I'm making two-sided centerpieces, a lazy Susan becomes incredibly handy.

Gather in the Garden

For most bouquets I like to use at least three types of foliage, three different airy fillers, three types of flowers and a few funky textural elements. For this bouquet my foliage choices were scented geranium, nasturtium vines and dock. For the airy fillers I used annual baby's breath, parsley flowers and oregano blooms. My focal flowers were sherbet-toned garden roses, dahlias and butterfly snapdragons, and for the unique twists I added in cardoon blossoms, leek flowers, crabapple branches and poppy pods. Of course, every arrangement doesn't have to be this elaborate or full. I tend to really love a wide variety of ingredients and most bouquets leaving my hands have over a dozen treats inside!

Before noon and then again in the evening are the very best times of day to harvest. Flowers are the most hydrated and al-

ways at their finest when temps are cool. After you've gathered a nice selection of ingredients, place them into water and let them sit and condition for at least half an hour before arranging. I often give them a little longer if they look droopy or if the weather is warm.

Arrange Your Flowers

To begin, you'll want to establish the shape of your arrangement. While some folks like low, tight domes or perfectly sculpted fans of blooms, I tend to gravitate to a much freer, looser, slightly wild style. In the end, I want my bouquets to look as if they almost grew in the vase. To achieve this feel, I follow the off-centered triangle approach with one point being high in the back, one swooping low in the front and one corner winging out to the side. I always say, the wilder, the better!

Once the general shape is established, begin adding in your foliage, following along the same planes as your outlining ingredients. I imagine the bouquet as a ski jump with one side being high and the other swooping down and leveling out.

The second phase is where the focal flowers come into play. I like to have at least one vertical element like the butterfly snapdragons so I can thread them in amongst the foliage to weave in

color. I then add in some nice full blooms like garden roses and dahlias towards the front of the bouquet. Because they are such full elements I place them a little lower than the rest of the mix.

Then comes the fun part, adding in the oddball ingredients! These can be tucked around the arrangement for maximum impact and conversation factor. I love hearing, "Is that a tomato? Are those raspberries?! Do I see an artichoke in there?!"

And lastly, weaving some airy bits in amongst the greens and blooms will add movement and sparkle to your final arrangement. Bolted cilantro, annual baby's breath, nigella, grasses and Queen Anne's lace will all do the trick. Then tweak anything that needs adjusting and voila! Be sure to refill your vase with water each day since fresh garden blooms drink a lot of water.

By looking beyond the flower patch and into the meadows, roadside thickets, weedy urban lots, hedgerows and even the veggie plot, one can experience nature in the most magical of ways. Here's to grabbing the clippers, disrupting the display and bringing nature inside!

