

buckets full of blossoms



On her 2-acre organic farm in Washington's Skagit Valley, a young floral entrepreneur grows beautiful blooms and inspires others to change their relationship with flowers.

Erin Benzakein is one of the flower world's new crop of floral artists who plants and grows the seasonal ingredients that comprise lovely, handcrafted arrangements and bouquets. Her Mount Vernon, Washington, acreage may be small, but this farmer-florist has a big vision for offering a healthy, beautiful, and local alternative to imported, conventionally grown flowers. "We do not use harsh chemicals, and all of our flowers are grown with the utmost care and love," she says.

When Benzakein was working as a part-time landscaper in 2003, she observed how estate gardeners cut flowers and other botanical elements for arrangements. "I had not realized you could go into your yard and cut flowers," she says. "Those bouquets looked like Dutch paintings with perennials, berries, vines, and floppy roses." Benzakein took floral-arranging courses and studied with top studio designers, but she credits nature, more than anything, as her inspiration and her instructor. "I specialize in heirloom, fragrant,

and romantic flowers, and I design by the seasons," she says. "I love the natural approach."

As a city-raised child, Benzakein loved to dig in the dirt. As a young adult, she imagined living a country life that combined flower farming, floral design, and raising her children with husband Chris. With a \$1,000 loan from her mother and a run-down van, she launched Floret in 2007. Through word of mouth and the power of social media, her modest venture has flourished into a thriving cottage industry. "It's a jumpin' little business," Benzakein says with obvious pride.

The Benzakeins and their children, Elora and Jasper, live and work on the floriferous acres. Their certified-organic land is populated with 25 bantam chickens, a half-dozen ducks, and thousands of flowers, including 40 varieties of perennials, 45 varieties of sweet peas, and 250 varieties of dahlias. Flowering trees, rare shrubs, vines, and berries and



Flower grower and designer Erin Benzakein's bouquet features just-picked blooms, foliage, herbs, and edibles—in warm summer hues—from her Washington State flower farm.



Crested celosia



Queen Anne's lace



Nigella

make a hand-tied bouquet

Farmer-florist Erin Benzakein has devised her “perfect” flower recipe to fashion a lush, fun, seasonal bouquet. Her design technique works with a variety of flowers. Use this project as a guide, but feel free to substitute flowers and foliage from your own garden.

Focal flower: Dahlia, peony, rose, or other dramatic bloom

Disk flowers: A smaller flower, equally eye-catching, described by Benzakein as “providing a chunk of color to the bouquet”

Foliage: Herbs, soft greenery, or green flowers, such as bells of Ireland

Fillers: Soft textural elements, such as milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.)

Spikes: Strong vertical elements, such as snapdragons or lobelia

Airy bits: Wispy, fluid element, such as Queen Anne's lace, nigella, goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.), or annual flaxseed heads



Step 1: Hold one or two focal flowers in your left hand and arrange with your right hand (or opposite if you are left-handed). These will become the center of the design. Here, Benzakein selected two stems of crested celosia.

Step 2: Working in a circle as you rotate, add layers of elements by crossing the stems. “I add foliage, then filler, then another focal flower,” she says. Here, the foliage is bells of Ireland, the filler is milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.), and the new focal flower is a red dahlia.

Step 3: Continue to rotate the bouquet, layering one more round of foliage, filler, and disk flowers (the

smaller dahlias). Benzakein selected snapdragons and lobelia as her spike elements, inserting them from the top and pulling them into place to emerge above the other flowers.

Step 4: Add airy elements, including annual flaxseed heads. “This gives the bouquet a little twinkle,” she says. Notice how the stems are symmetrically spiraled out and how Benzakein is holding the bouquet gently at its base.

Step 5: Other airy elements, such as Queen Anne's lace, nigella seedpods, and goldenrod, lend a finishing touch. Benzakein adds these before securely tying the bouquet with twine and finishing it with decorative ribbon.



To keep a hand-tied bouquet looking fresh, stand it in a vase of water as soon as possible after it is completed. Ensure that every stem is submerged in the water.



Benzakein adores garden roses, which are a favorite of her bridal clients. This bucket contains two sublime varieties of David Austin roses: 'Port Sunlight' and 'Teasing Georgia'.

vegetables, such as fava beans, pea pods, alpine strawberries, and cherry tomatoes, contribute to Benzakein's arrangements. Each bouquet reflects the bounty from her fields—a moment in time that connects its recipient with nature and the seasons.

This now-experienced flower farmer says her philosophy was developed through years of experimentation and good advice from fellow growers. Benzakein's methods include efficient use of land and greenhouse space, detailed succession planting schedules, crop rotation, and daily harvesting.

The next generation, Jasper and Elora, are

involved in tending, harvesting, and preparing bouquets, although they also operate The Little Red Hen House, a thriving egg business (the eggs are delivered to customers in Seattle). "We get a lot of family time," Benzakein says.

The allure of flowers is not lost on this hardworking floral artist, though. "At first, I just loved my flowers, and I would give them away," she says. "People were so moved, and it surprised me. Yes, I love gardening. And yes, I adore my flowers, but the fact that they are so powerful—that's why I love what I do so much."