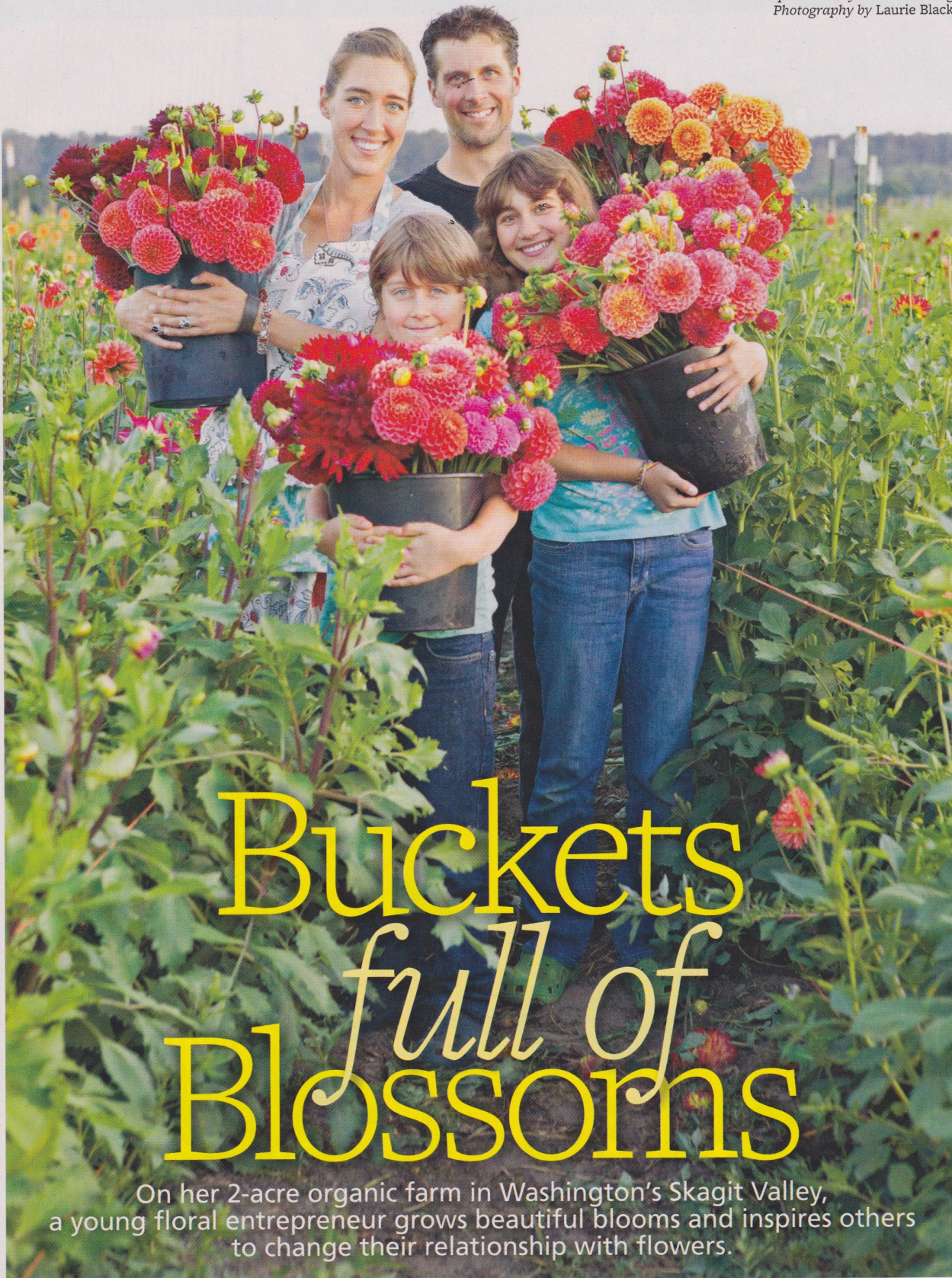


Written and produced by Debra Prinzing  
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# Buckets *full of* Blossoms

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.



*Opposite:* Erin and Chris Benzakein, along with Jasper and Elora, grow hundreds of varieties, including the ever-popular dahlia. *Above:* Erin's wistful bouquet features just-picked blooms, foliage, herbs, and edibles—in warm summer tones.

ERIN BENZAKEIN IS DOUBLY TALENTED, one of the flower world's new crop of floral artists who plant and grow the seasonal ingredients that comprise their lovely, handcrafted arrangements and bouquets. Her 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.

It all started with sweet peas, which gave Benzakein, a young mother in 2003, the dream of producing flowers professionally. With a few packets of seeds, she planted two rows, "creating a fragrant sweet-pea tunnel," she says. "I wanted to walk through it, just for the experience. Pretty soon, I was completely obsessed. I ripped out all the vegetables and replaced them with flowers."

At the time, Benzakein was working as a part-time landscaper. 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.

Today, the Benzakeins and their children, Elora (13) and Jasper (10), live and work on two floriferous acres. Their certified organic land is populated with thousands of flowers, 25 Bantam chickens, a half-dozen ducks, and all sorts of salamanders, snakes, and tadpoles living in the children's aquarium tanks.

Flowering trees, rare shrubs, vines, bulbs, perennials, annuals, and even unusual berries and vegetables, such as fava beans, peapods, alpine strawberries, and cherry tomatoes, comprise



China aster  
(*Callistephus chinensis*)



Dahlia 'AC Firefly'



Dahlia 'Cafe au Lait'



Floss flower  
(*Ageratum houstonianum*)

## Garden at a glance **Floret**

**Where:** Mount Vernon,  
Washington (about 65  
miles north of Seattle)

**What:** 2 acres, certified  
organic

**Zone:** USDA Zone 8a

**More details:**  
[floretflowers.com](http://floretflowers.com)

**Floret by the numbers**  
**2** acres

**10** hoop houses/  
greenhouses

**260** varieties of annuals  
and herbs grown from  
seed

**30** varieties of  
ornamental shrubs,  
planted for their blooms  
and as wildlife habitat

**150** garden rose bushes

**40** varieties of perennials

**45** varieties of sweet peas

**3,000** dahlia plants  
(about 250 varieties)



*Above:* Early morning harvesting is one time when Erin is alone with her flowers and her thoughts. Those musings often reappear in her popular blog, Floret, about life on a flower farm. *Below:* Erin 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'.

Benzakein's unique 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 sustainable 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—all of which maximize every square inch of land.

Jasper and Elora are involved in every aspect of tending, harvesting, and preparing bouquets, although they also operate The Little Red Hen House, a thriving fresh-egg business (the eggs are delivered to Benzakein's 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. 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."

