



*Evocative range:* Erin Benzakein, founder of Floret Flower Farm, holds an armful of Willowfield Matthew dahlias. The family business, based in Skagit Valley, Washington, specializes in unique, uncommon, and heirloom flowers (opposite).

CHRIS BENZAKEIN, JOY PROUTY, FLORET FARMS CUT FLOWER GARDEN, GROW, HARVEST AND ARRANGE STUNNING SEASONAL BLOOMS BY ERIN BENZAKEIN AND JULIE CHAI, PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHELLE M. WAITE (CHRONICLE BOOKS, \$29.95)

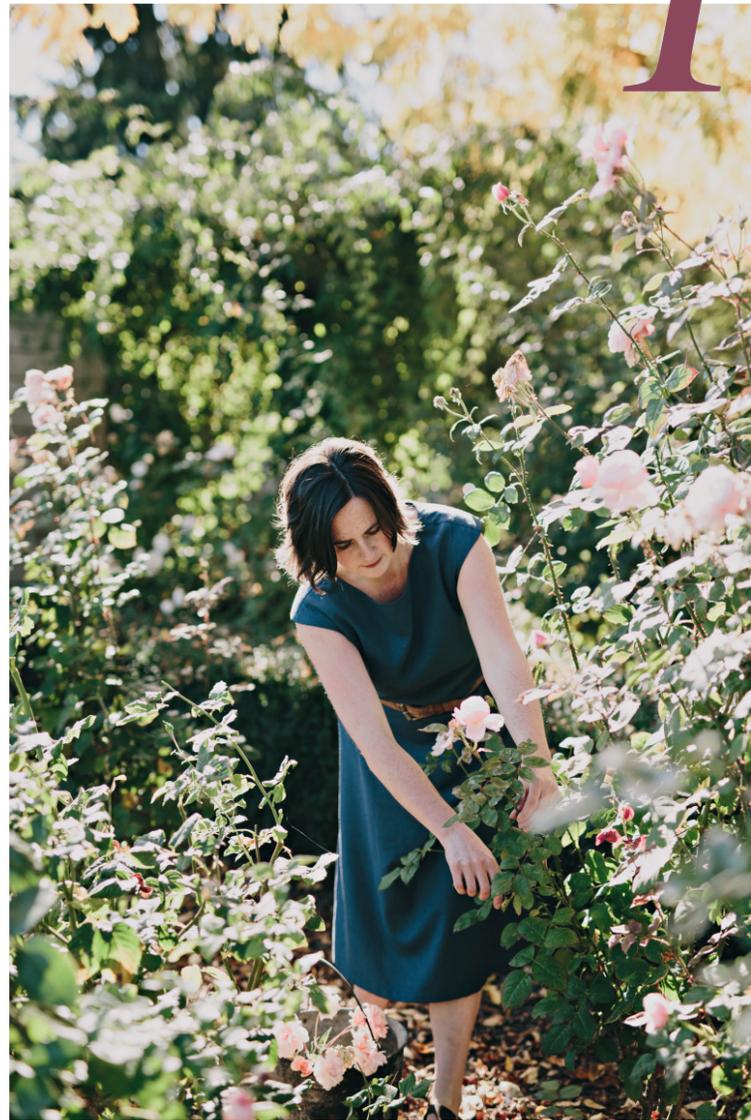


# Pick of the bunch

**A cutting garden that stands apart from ornamental beds and borders lets you have a home full of beautiful blooms all year round—all you need is a little careful planning**

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Harvesting armfuls of fresh flowers from your garden—like growing vegetables and picking fruit from your own trees—gives the joy of growing real purpose. The reaction against wasteful “flower miles” means cutting gardens are enjoying a resurgence: traditional flower farms are springing up again, and flower fields for cutting are being designed into large gardens and country estates.

At the heart of the modern cutting garden is a celebration of seasonality, regardless of whether you explore contemporary planting trends or look to the past for inspiration—the rich tapestries of color that embodied 19th-century Arts and Crafts gardens, for example, or the symbolic blooms and stems that inform *ikebana*, the ancient art of Japanese flower arranging.

The real joy of a well-planned cutting garden is being able to fill your home with fresh flowers without having to plunder beds and borders. As the English gardener and author Sarah Raven says in her book, *The Cutting Garden*: “What would have felt untouchable in the main part of the garden can be guiltlessly harvested here. A cutting garden is a place for picking; it’s the part of the garden that’s in service to the house.”

It can also boost your home’s appeal. “A garden for cut flowers enhances a listing’s beauty and sense of place,” observes Melanie Delman of Lila Delman Real Estate in Newport, Rhode Island, the exclusive affiliate of Christie’s International Real Estate in the region. “It can be a private sanctuary for an owner or a more visible element of an estate’s grounds. Either way, it is a natural element that resonates with many buyers, providing color, scent, and beauty.” »

“A garden for cut flowers enhances a listing’s beauty and sense of place, and resonates with buyers.”  
*Melanie Delman*



Simple elegance: Master gardener Clare Monica Day (opposite), explains how to cultivate and create beautiful displays (this page) in her digital course, *Garden to Vase*.



**Getting started**

Creating the perfect cutting garden does take a little effort, and there are some practicalities to consider. You'll need a sunny spot with fertile, well-drained soil, ideally shielded from the rest of the estate because this is a practical, rather than a purely decorative, space—low evergreen hedging or a picket fence works well. Professional growers recommend you work in simple rectangular blocks or rows, with practical consideration given to maintenance. Although you may not be irrigating, planting, or weeding the soil yourself, there is so much pleasure to be had from cutting flowers that ease of reach is a priority.

Erin Benzakein from Floret Flower Farm in Washington's Skagit Valley recommends long beds around three feet wide for easy access from either side. Kathleen Murphy from New York state's Primrose Hill Flower Company came up with a similar approach: "My greatest struggle with becoming a flower farmer was not thinking like a gardener," she says. "In my gardens, I planted large, curvy swathes of color. Now, I had to plant in evenly spaced rows—I thought I would go mad planting in rows! Initially, I created beds that were much too wide, and staking was another challenge." Murphy now designs beds 60 feet by three feet, and she stakes her young plants carefully before they even begin to grow.

Depending on your location, protecting your cutting garden from hungry deer, rabbits, and woodchucks is another consideration, along with soil nutrition and irrigation. At Floret Flower Farm, Benzakein nourishes the soil every season: "We grow our flowers organically, so compost, natural fertilizers, mulch, and foliar compost tea treatments are essential items in our toolbox."

Canadian floral designer and master gardener Clare Monica Day also offers useful advice:



"Consider grouping plants by their need for water: grow drought-tolerant plants next to each other, and locate water-hungry plants in a separate block."

**Planning your plants**

Choosing what to plant, and where to place them, is the next decision you and your designer need to make. Although cutting gardens are there to be harvested, the best ones also look wonderful. Blocks of single plants, grown en masse, create the greatest impact: Raven advocates placing blocks of stronger colors in the foreground, with whites and pale colors fading off into the distance; Murphy recommends planting young seedlings of small plants seven to nine inches apart, and larger varieties a foot apart.

Your most challenging task will then be deciding between hundreds of exquisite flower

**Strategic operation:** Kathleen Murphy of Primrose Hill Flower Company in New York state has adapted the way she plants to enable easy picking of flowers.

**On the market**  
**THRIVING PROSPECTS**

**Otterington Hall**  
North Yorkshire, UK  
£3,950,000  
Strutt & Parker  
Luke Morgan  
+44 20 7318 5095



Home to some of the finest yew topiary in England, this glorious 19th-century manor features front lawns that open into a series of garden "rooms" with a range of borders and water features. There is also a kitchen garden and a large greenhouse with two productive grape vines. The estate, covering some 91 acres, includes three cottages along with the nine-bedroom main house.

**Marshland cottage**  
Sea Island, Georgia, USA  
\$13,500,000  
Seabolt Brokers  
Elaine Seabolt  
+1 912 233 6609



This residence overlooks picturesque marshland and is surrounded by bonsai-like live oaks. Highlights include an expansive private walled garden, a large verandah with a teak-trimmed pool, and an outdoor dining area. The residence, constructed of reclaimed Savannah Grey bricks, also boasts a home theater, grand living and dining areas, and a master suite with water views.

varieties. Ideally, your plot should have a mix of annuals (pretty, short-lived plants such as nigella and cosmos), perennials (showstoppers such as peony and delphinium), shrubs that remain in the ground for many years (rose, hydrangea, and lilac), as well as bulbs (tulips, daffodils, alliums, and lilies), and tubers (dahlias are a must for every cutting garden). Combine a variety of flower shapes—daisies, spires, plumes, globes, and umbellifers—and introduce a few foliage plants and evergreen herbs. Drought-tolerant plants from the Southern Hemisphere, including protea, kniphofia, and watsonia, make beautiful cut flowers in hot, dry climates.

And if you're creating a compact cutting patch as part of a larger garden, or you simply want to trial the idea, Day has a clever suggestion: "Choose a minimum of three flowers for each growing window," she says. "In other words, three flowers that will bloom in early spring, three for mid-spring, late spring, early summer, and so on. This simple approach will give you a continuous supply of blooms throughout the season."

Murphy recommends "clean-cutting" to help your flower display look beautiful for longer. "We clean every item that will touch the flower stems with bleach, including secateurs and containers," she says. "Ideally, we cut our flowers first thing in the morning or at dusk, and we always put a drop of bleach in the vase water."

**Expert assistance**

Guidance for budding flower growers is easy to find. Floret Flower Farm's *Cut Flower Garden* condenses Benzakein's expertise into 300 beautifully illustrated pages. She also offers the Floret Online Workshop, a six-week video-based course. Day's Garden to Vase workshop is a step-by-step digital guide that provides the tools and techniques you need to cultivate cut flowers. Murphy, meanwhile, shares her knowledge in Foundations for Growing Cut Flowers, the Primrose Hill Flower Company's online course. Instagram is another source of inspiration—Becky Crowley (@beckycrowley\_), head gardener at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, England, grows cut flowers for the stately home and regularly posts her bounty.

"I'm constantly amazed by the power that flowers have to tap into our emotions," observes Benzakein. "They have an amazing ability to bring us joy. They provide comfort and help heal broken hearts. They spark memories and stir nostalgia. The joy we can all find in growing and sharing flowers is really rather remarkable." ●

*Aileen Scoular is a lifestyle journalist and award-winning garden designer*

**Petal power**  
**TEN GARDEN-TO-VASE BLOOMS**

**COSMOS**

Pictured above, this is the most productive "cut-and-come-again" annual you can grow, says Floret Flower Farm's Erin Benzakein.

"The more you harvest them, the more they bloom, producing buckets of flowers for many months."

**DAHLIA**

"You can't beat the Cafe au Lait variety," says Clare Monica Day of the dahlia (left). "But I also love the pompon and anemone types, which are fun to grow."

**BEARDED IRIS**

"Suppliers such as Mid-America Garden and Schreiner's are producing some truly incredible varieties," says Day.

**FOXTAIL AMARANTH**

"The striking deep plum foliage and dark purple-red flower spikes are so dramatic," says Kathleen Murphy from the Primrose Hill Flower Company.

**SNAPDRAGON**

Also known as antirrhinum, these frilly blooms are very productive. "My favorite mix is Madame Butterfly," says Benzakein.

**PEONY**

"Peonies never disappoint," says Day. She recommends the Jan van Leeuwen variety, with white petals and a soft yellow center.

**RANUNCULUS**

Another of Day's top choices, with stunning colors and long-lasting blooms (right).

**NIGELLA**

"Such a pretty flower, and its seed pod adds much interest to a bouquet," says Murphy.

**ROSE**

Every cutting garden needs roses, and David Austin's English varieties are exquisite.

**ZINNIA**

"Nothing says 'summer' more than an armload of these," Benzakein concludes. "Zinnias (left) grow well in virtually any climate."



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