

“From a purely aesthetic point of view, flowers in season have more character; the stems are more quirky and beautiful and graceful. And, you can get much more nuanced color than what’s available in mass-produced flowers.”

—AMY MERRICK, FLORAL DESIGNER

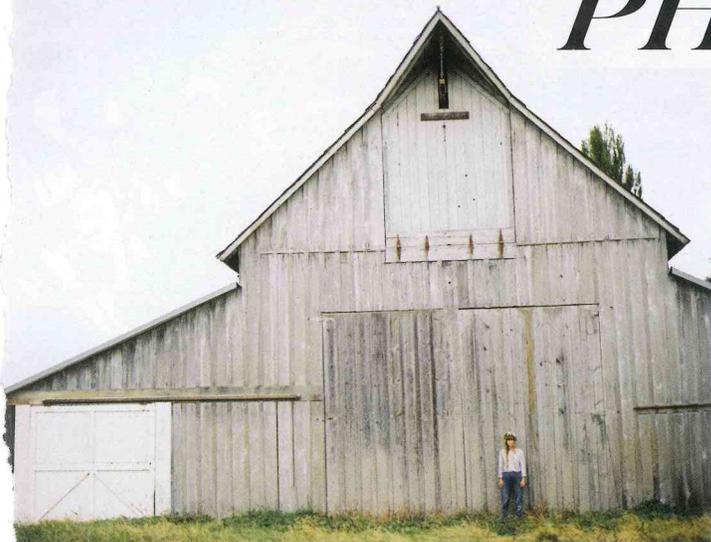


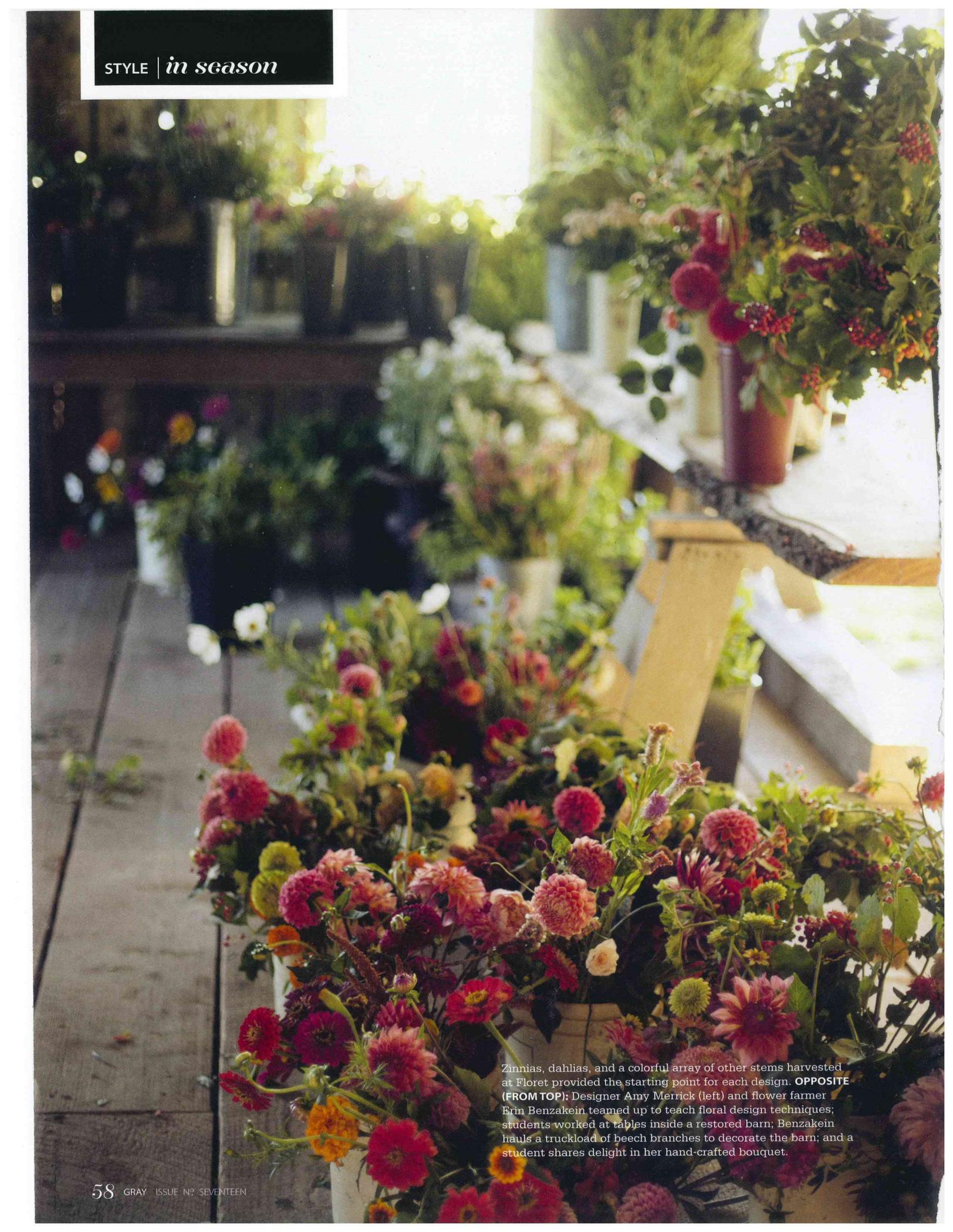
A bouquet features a blush-colored dahlia with dusky accompaniments, including a mauve Queen Anne’s lace, scented geranium foliage, and dark purple pincushion flowers. **BELOW:** Her head adorned with a woven floral crown, a Floret workshop attendee poses in front of a Skagit Valley barn.

PHANTASM OF FLORA

Out in a fairy-tale field in Skagit Valley, a flower farmer and floral designer create the perfect gathering amidst summer’s bountiful blooms.

Written by DEBRA PRINZING • Photographed by LAURA D’ART





Zinnias, dahlias, and a colorful array of other stems harvested at Floret provided the starting point for each design. **OPPOSITE (FROM TOP):** Designer Amy Merrick (left) and flower farmer Erin Benzakein teamed up to teach floral design techniques; students worked at tables inside a restored barn; Benzakein hauls a truckload of beech branches to decorate the barn; and a student shares delight in her hand-crafted bouquet.

Come August, the flower fields of the Pacific Northwest are unparalleled, a polychromatic explosion of textures and scents. In a lush corner of Mount Vernon, Washington, Erin Benzakein harvests colorful zinnias, velvety celosia, and other blooms from Floret, her organic two-acre cut-flower farm. As of last year, she also hosts workshops at her farm, teaching floral aficionados the art of natural flower design.

For her first weekend intensive, she invited a collaborator, Amy Merrick, a Brooklyn, New York-based floral designer and stylist known for her wild, nostalgic floral arrangements (picture a Dutch master painting come to life). The session sold out in two days.

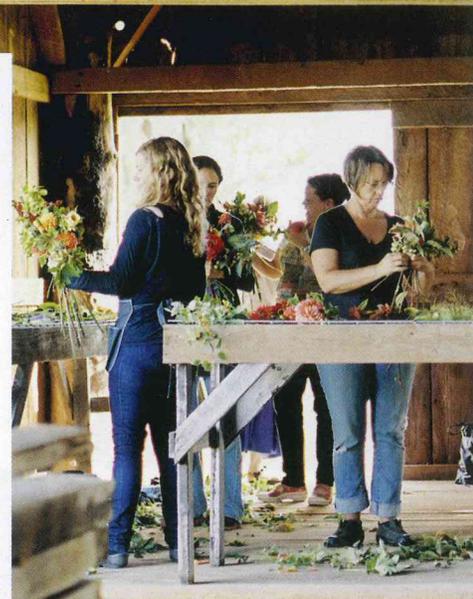
It sounds academic to say that 17 flower enthusiasts—ranging from professional designers to those just entering the field—gathered to learn basic floral harvesting, care techniques, and to study the mechanics of bouquet-making. Yes, that was the focus—but it was much more than that, once you factor in the dreaminess of 3,500 dahlias at their peak, plus thousands of stems of lavish annuals, perennials, vines, herbs, and fruiting branches of the season. Merrick and Benzakein conjured up something more like performance art than a heady and intellectual study, as they emphasized a sense of place and nature's diversity. Let loose in Floret's growing fields, the participants were

urged to raid the fields to their hearts' content. "That's everyone's dream, right?" Benzakein says. "To have your senses overwhelmed by flowers. It was pretty epic."

Their arms laden with delicate tendrils, petals, and pods, the students filled three pickup truckloads with buckets of blooms and followed Merrick and Benzakein to Basye Farm, a Skagit Valley homestead located just three miles away. There, inside a recently restored 19th-century barn, the design class began.

Merrick shared techniques to create wistful bouquets, centerpieces, and whimsical flower crowns. Standing around long trestle tables, each participant practiced the loose grip that Merrick demonstrated, letting the flowers relax in their hands and building a natural, open structure.

For Kailla Platt, a Portland garden designer-turned-florist, the chance to learn from women she knew only through blogs and Instagram feeds was nothing short of magical. "The stars aligned and I got to be part of it," she says. "You couldn't help but come away being inspired." Immersed in just-picked florals and surrounded by creative, like-minded women, Platt pinpoints the workshop as the "fire" that gave her the confidence to formally launch her studio, Kailla Platt Flowers. »



**FLORET
WORKSHOPS**
ERIN BENZAKEIN OFFERS
ONGOING SEASONAL
WORKSHOPS IN
MOUNT VERNON; THE NEXT
ONES ARE AUGUST 19-20;
SEPTEMBER 28-30; AND
OCTOBER 2-4.
floretflowers.com



On the second evening, with new friendships formed and newfound assurance in their personal talents, the women enjoyed a farm-to-table dinner inside the vintage barn. Fittingly, Benzakein and Merrick chose *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the meal's theme. Anne Parker, a Portland chef, prepared a menu as local as the flowers.

Garlands of hop vines festooned the rafters and beech branches turned the upright posts into trees, reflecting the carefree spirit of summer. Each woman's head was encircled by a floral crown of her own making. Tables were decorated with flowers, fruit, and foliage, illuminated by votives.

So often Benzakein sends her flowers out into the world, not knowing how they will be shaped by others' hands. This time was different, she says. "It was so cool to see our flowers elevated to such a blissful level."

People came to learn skills, but they left with something more, Merrick observes. "So much of the workshop was about empowering each other to live out our dreams, putting ourselves into the world as creative women."

If it's true that flowers symbolize words not always spoken aloud, one could say that each designer held a promise in her hands. In Skagit Valley, for one weekend, kinship flourished and Eden felt possible. ✱



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FROM FLORET'S
WORKSHOP AND
DINNER AT GRAYMAG
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OPPOSITE (FROM TOP): Handmade garlands and a lush arrangement set the mood for the party designed by the participants; the menu was as local as the flowers on the table; and hanging votives illuminated the barn at dusk. **THIS PAGE:** With hop vines draped overhead and a linen-covered table embellished with seasonal flowers, foliage, and branches, the workshop concluded with an unforgettable field-to-vase, farm-to-table meal.