

HOMEGROWN BLOOMS

*planting, cultivating, and
harvesting a cut flower garden*

story by ERIN BENZAKEIN

photography by CHRIS BENZAKEIN AND MICHÈLE M. WAITE

Even when life feels busy, it's hard to hurry past a collection of fresh cut flowers. Their beauty and variety prompt us to marvel at just how unique our world can be. If you're interested in growing your own homegrown blooms, it's simple to do using a garden bed or potting soil.

While some gardeners have been conditioned to resist the desire to pick from their blooming plants and to leave them, instead, to put on a flowery display outdoors, the primary job of a cutting garden is to produce a bounty of cut blooms all season long. A cutting patch is beautiful in its own right, but the flowers are meant to be harvested. Time spent pruning, watering, and fertilizing your homegrown beauties will be rewarded with custom arrangements that serve as daily reminders to stop and take in the view.



PLANTS TO GROW

My general rule is to split the garden in half and plant 50 percent foliage and 50 percent flowers. This approach will give you an abundance of bouquet ingredients. You can get started with these summer blooms.

Flowers

Focal flowers are the featured blooms in an arrangement—the ones supported and highlighted by all the other ingredients. They are typically larger, showier flowers.



DAHLIA

When to grow: Plant tubers April–June for August–October bloom.

Special care: Plants need full sun, well-drained soil, plenty of water, and organic matter, like compost.



ZINNIA

When to grow: Plant seedlings or direct-sow seeds after weather has warmed.

Special care: Snip center flower bud when plants are 18 inches tall for branching and longer stems.



COSMOS

When to grow: Start indoors or sow outside after last expected frost.

Special care: Cut often, and remove spent flowers for maximum bloom all season.



ROSES

When to grow: Plant bare-root roses in late fall or late winter/early spring.

Special care: Grow in full sun and rich, heavily amended soil.

Foliage

While often overlooked, foliage plants are the backbone of a productive cut flower garden. One of the biggest mistakes new gardeners make is growing only flowers, then having nothing else to complete a full arrangement.



BASIL

When to grow: Plant seedlings or direct-sow seeds after weather warms.

Special care: Wilt-prone, so harvest in the cool of the morning or evening, and let rest in water for a few hours.



NASTURTIUM

When to grow: Start seeds indoors 4–6 weeks before last expected frost, and transplant after frost ends.

Special care: Provide support for vines to climb.



NINEBARK

When to grow: Buy potted plants from a local nursery; plant in fall.

Special care: Allow plants plenty of space to grow.



RASPBERRY GREENS

When to grow: Buy bare-root plants from a local nursery and plant in fall or early spring.

Special care: Plants multiply over time, so allow ample room for spreading.

Filler

Filler flowers infuse bouquets with color and interest. They work to highlight the focal flower in arrangements. These stems typically have sprays of blossoms.



QUEEN ANNE'S LACE

When to grow: Start seeds indoors 6–8 weeks before last expected frost; transplant while weather is still cool.

Special care: Plants get large, so space them 18 inches apart and provide support.



SEA HOLLY

When to grow: These are tricky to start from seeds so, for ease, buy pots from a local nursery.

Special care: Drought-tolerant; minimal care once established.



Take a day to plan what your garden will be—choosing and mapping your blooms and stems. The time you spend dreaming up your design is an investment that will yield a beautiful reward.

The primary job of a cutting garden is to produce a bounty of cut blooms all season long.



FROM SEED TO BLOOM

Follow these steps to keep your garden filled with flowers all season long.

PLANT SEEDLINGS

In late spring or early summer, plant seedlings, bulbs, and tubers for summer flowers. You can sow multiple plantings of all the warm-weather lovers, including basil, celosia, globe amaranth, cosmos, and zinnias.

WATER

As temperatures rise, keeping the garden hydrated is vital. Even if you are tending a tiny plot, set up some type of watering system, such as soaker hoses, to keep your flowers happy.

STAKE, TRELLIS & TIE

Providing plants with support is the key to growing long, straight stems and avoiding potential weather damage. As plants grow, loosely tie stems to stakes with twine or string.

PINCH

Pinching is a form of pruning. The practice encourages plants to produce more branches near the base, which increases the total number of flowering stems. When plants are 8–12 inches tall, use sharp pruners to snip the top 3–4 inches from the plant, just above a set of leaves.

KEEP WEEDING

Catch weeds while they are young and easy to remove. Cultivate lightly around young plants to keep weeds in check.

HARVEST & DEADHEAD

To extend the harvest, snip off spent or damaged flowers. This will encourage plants to send up new growth and flower over a longer period.



CARING FOR CUT FLOWERS

It's a thrilling experience to stroll through a cutting garden, harvesting armloads of fresh flowers you grew yourself. Consider these tips to help you get the longest vase life and maximum enjoyment from your homegrown blooms.

Use clean, sharp clippers. Rusty, dull flower snips can damage stems and reduce the vase life of blooms. Invest in high-quality clippers, clean them after each use, and sharpen them regularly.

Harvest in the coolest parts of the day. Early morning and evening—when plants are most hydrated—are the best times to cut. Blooms harvested in midday heat will wilt faster and have a harder time bouncing back.

Take a bucket of water into the garden. Cut stems should go in water right away with all stem ends well below the water line. Fresh flowers drink a lot, especially in the first few days.

Remove lower leaves from stems. Foliage remaining on the stem will quickly decay once it's submerged in water. Bacteria from the decaying process can prevent stem ends from taking up water.

Always use clean buckets and vases. Thoroughly clean your vessels with hot, soapy water. Dirt and bacteria can quickly clog flower stems and shorten their vase life.

Allow flowers time to rest before arranging them. After cutting your flowers and foliage, begin the process of conditioning by placing them in deep, cool water overnight (or for at least three to four hours).

TAKE YOUR *flowers* INTO THE WORLD



BUNDLED GIFT

When homegrown and freshly cut, flowers don't need fancy packaging.



VASE

Simple groupings outweigh complex arrangements.



CENTERPIECE

Fresh cut blooms make a striking focal point.



Erin Benzakein, founder and owner of Floret, offers floral advice in two books. Cut Flower Garden features planting, cultivating, and harvesting advice for more than 175 flower varieties along with tips to preserve their freshness from garden to vase. The New York Times best seller A Year in Flowers outlines everything you need to start making your own spectacular arrangements, whether you're harvesting flowers from the backyard or sourcing ingredients from the local market.