the no-stress, annuals-only CUTTING GARDEN

Growing backyard bouquets is fast, inexpensive, and much easier than you might think. Floret Farm's Erin Benzakein shows us the way.



o matter what size yard you have, filling your home with fresh flowers all summer long can be more than something you just think about. Erin Benzakein, owner of Floret Farm, says you can grow bushels of blooms to harvest for months simply by planting easy-to-grow annuals. She should know: The farmerflorist raises hundreds of thousands of flowers each year on her small farm in Washington's Skagit Valley. She reveals

Erin Benzakein, above, spends her days surrounded by flowers. In addition to growing and harvesting on her family's farm, she teaches workshops, cultivates seeds and dahlia tubers for sale, and maintains the wildly popular Instagram feed @floretflower.

the secrets to floral success in her new book. Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden: Grow, Harvest, & Arrange Stunning Seasonal Blooms. Annuals are perfect for beginners, Erin says, because they need little care and produce abundantly from late spring through the first frost. "As long as they get sun, water, fertilizer, and decent soil, you're good to go," Erin says. "Even if you don't have a green thumb, growing annuals will make you feel like a winner." And, in addition to creating all-annual bouquets, you can combine them with any seasonal stars (peonies, roses, dahlias), evergreen foliage, and herbs growing in your yard.

GROWING FOR THE VASE

When choosing which annuals to grow, consider the bouquet colors and textures you'd like to see in your home, and build from there. Also focus on varieties that peak at roughly the same time so you'll have various different flowers to arrange together. (Look for "days to maturity" on seed packets.) Erin highly recommends starting plants from seed. It's quite inexpensive (roughly \$4 per packet), gives you a longer bloom window (if you start seeds ahead indoors), and means you can grow less common varieties, like those shown on these pages, which she sells in her online shop (floretflowers.com). If you'd rather start seedlings, look for similar plants at your local nursery or at Annie's Annuals & Perennials (anniesannuals.com), one of Erin's favorite online sources.

START FROM SEEDS

Erin recommends starting seeds indoors because you'll get stronger plants and a much longer bloom window.

Learn some of the basics from Erin's book:

START EARLY

Ideally, plant seeds indoors six to eight weeks before your Zone's last spring frost. (Check online or with your local garden center to find this date.) Transplant outside after any danger of frost has passed. Although many varieties can be sown directly outdoors after weather warms up, starting seeds inside is worth it to protect tender seedlings from pests and harsh weather. It also gives you a jump start on the season for an earlier harvest. If you get seedlings in the ground by mid- to late spring, blooms will be most

abundant from mid- to late summer. If you live in the warmest parts of the country, you'll enjoy an even longer flowering season.

ALLOT SPACE

For reference, a 4×8-foot bed accommodates 54 plants, or nine each of six varieties, such as those in the three palettes on page 80. They will produce more than enough flowers for your own weekly bouquets, as well as plenty for sharing with friends and family, through the height of the season. If you don't have a separate annual garden bed, tuck them in bare spots in the landscape.



GIVE THEM LIGHT

Grow in a spot that gets at least six hours of direct sun a day.

FEED YOUR SOIL

A few weeks before planting seedlings, till a 2- to 4-inch layer of well-rotted compost and a dose of organic fertilizer into planting areas.



moisture is one of the biggest keys to happy flowers, so water often enough that soil stays evenly moist but not soggy. Drip irrigation and soaker hoses are fantastic ways to get water right where you need it—at the root zone.

CUT & CARE GUIDE

You've grown great flowers, now tap these trade secrets to keep them looking their best in your arrangements.



CLEAN AND SANITIZE BUCKETS AND VASES

of the most important things to do to extend the vase life of your cut flowers. A good rule of thumb is that vessels should be clean enough to drink from.

HARVEST REGULARLY

Erin's plant palette suggestions include cut-and-come-again varieties, meaning the more you cut, the more they'll produce. So it's key to harvest flowers at least once a week to keep them setting new flowers. Also be sure to clip any flowers you missed on the last pass and are past their prime. Cut before flowers completely open and in the cool of the morning or evening.

STRIP AND PLACE STEMS IN COOL, CLEAN

water Carry a water-filled bucket. As you harvest remove leaves from the lower half of the stems and place immediately into the water. This will minimize wilting because there is less foliage to rehydrate.

LET STEMS REST

Place buckets of freshly picked stems in a cool spot, out of direct sunlight, to rest for a few hours before arranging. This gives the flowers and foliage a chance to fully rehydrate.

ADD FLORAL PRESERVATIVE Erin highly

recommends mixing flower food with your vase water as it can double the life of your cut stems. Her favorite, Floralife Crystal Clear, is available online.

66 Pick every flower. You can be as greedy as you want because the more you pick, the more they flower. 99 ERIN BENZAKEIN

PICK YOUR PALETTE

Erin shares three favorite bouquet palettes. Each contains six different kinds of plants, which produce plentiful flowers in the peak summer months and look as good growing in your garden as they do in cut bouquets.



INDIAN SUMMER

Texture and sunny color celebrate the carefree feeling of long summer days.



Amaranth 'Hot Biscuits' (1) and 'Opopeo' Celosia Pampas Plume mix (2) Black-eyed Susan 'Chim Chiminee' (3) Zinnia Persian Carpet Mix (4) Sunflower 'Starburst Panache' Frosted Explosion' grass

ROSY GLOW

Rich pinks, plum, and chocolate are perfect for anyone who loves saturated shades.



Zinnia 'Queen Red Lime' (1) and Sunbow Mix Chocolate Queen Anne's lace (2) Globe amaranth 'QIS Purple' (3) Basil 'Aromato' (4) or other purple type Cosmos Double Click Mix

SUNSET SHADES

Rare warm-hue flowers provide antique tones of apricot, bronze, and caramel.



Zinnia 'Oklahoma Salmon' (1) Pincushion flower 'Fata Morgana' (2) Amaranth 'Coral Fountain' Phlox 'Cherry Caramel' (3) Apricot strawflower (4) Black-eyed Susan 'Sahara'

BY THE NUMBERS

A typical market bouquet costs about

for 10 stems A 4×8-foot bed fits 54 plants. which will vield about

FLOWERS

per week during peak season. Those would cost \$400 at the market but cost just

if grown from seed (six \$4 packets).



THE BOOK

Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden is 300-plus pages of easy-to-follow, seriously useful information on growing and arranging flowers. \$29.95; chronicle books.com