

*in pursuit
of the*
**Perfect
Bloom**

**Floret Flower Farm
might just be the
prettiest place in the
West. Here's how Erin
and Chris Benzakein
built a blooming
business. Plus, how to
arrange bouquets the
Floret way.**

By Thad Orr

Photographs by Thomas J. Story

The most beautiful

research and development lab in the world is located a little more than an hour north of Seattle. It doesn't belong to an aerospace or technology company, but to husband-and-wife team Erin and Chris Benzakein, who run a 21-acre flower farm focused on producing the best flowers, seeds, tubers, and bulbs for growers and florists worldwide. From early spring into winter, the farm's thousands of flowers blossom in a continual parade of pastels—the daffodils, ranunculus, and hellebores bloom first; the peonies, lilacs, roses, sweet peas, and coneflowers come next. By the end of summer, dreamy dahlias flower by the thousands, in colors ranging from creamy white to shades of grenache. Nearly every cut flower imaginable has its season on the farm.

Floret's Instagram feed (@floretflower) has more than 637,000 fans. When they release seeds, tubers, or bulbs online they often sell out the first day. The couple runs workshops, shares their advice with their ever-expanding audience of professional and novice growers and floral arrangers, and have just published their second book, *Floret Farm's A Year in Flowers: Designing Gorgeous Arrangements for Every Season*.

For Erin and Chris, turning their backyard flower garden into one of the most successful cut-flower test gardens in the U.S. is the result of a 15-year process of figuring out what they love doing most: Teaching others how to grow flowers and build seasonal arrangements, and finding the best flowers so they can share them with the masses. "In 2001, Chris and I moved out of Seattle to a small farm in Skagit Valley where we had a vegetable garden and two rows of sweet peas growing in the backyard," says Erin. "We wanted our family to be able to connect with nature better on a daily basis. With each passing year I grew





From harvesting lavish armfuls of flowers for bouquets and photos to packing seeds for shipping, the days are long and full at Floret Flower Farm.



A Day in the Life of the Farm

Even in the garden's rest period from winter to spring, Floret Flower Farm is in a state of motion: planning trials, managing inventory, teaching classes. Here's an average day for Instagram's favorite flower farmer once the growing season begins.

4:00 am

"I wake up at 4:00 am on most days to work on writing, photo editing, or other flower-related creative projects for a couple hours," says Erin.

6:00 am

"When the farm crew arrives we do our daily farm walk to review the plan for the day. There's a lot going on—preparing planting beds, planting, trellising, staking, weeding, watering, or harvesting. We divide and conquer."

10:00 - 3:00

"Sometimes I'm working on the farm. Other times I work on our seed-packaging operation, photograph flowers with Chris, write plant descriptions for the website, have meetings with partners."

3:00 pm

After the farm crew heads home Erin does office work. "I head in after that to start on office work—things like getting caught up on emails, uploading photos, and scheduling meetings. This is when all the computer stuff gets done."

6:00 pm

"I'll do a farm walk by myself every evening. I like being alone with the plants after everyone has gone home. This is an important part of my day where I try to be present and take in the beauty of the farm."

The Essential Elements of a Floret Spring Bouquet:

Erin is known for arrangements that have a lush, abundant look. "I can't over-emphasize how important it is to seek out the best local foliage you can find," she says. The colors and shapes will naturally go together due to the nature of the season and the particularities of the regional ecology. Here's how she builds the larger and more dramatic statement pieces people use as centerpieces at parties and weddings.



Build a Base:

The internal, non-floral structure of a flower bouquet is called the "mechanics" of the piece. It's the invisible structure upon which a bouquet is built and helps it hold its shape. Chicken wire custom-bent to the shape of the vase or vessel provides a matrix of support for all of the components. Waterproof tape across the top keeps it secure and in place.



Set Your Shape:

One of Erin's go-to and dramatic statement foundations is built on three points: a 25-degree large diagonal on one side, a similar but shorter diagonal opposite, and a lower shorter point in front to create a multi-level, stepped shape. This intentional asymmetry creates visual interest and a sense of movement, and mimics the golden ratio found in most iconic works of art.



1. **STRUCTURAL FOLIAGE:** The framework of the bouquet made of cuttings from shrubs, trees, and woody branches. In the spring, this can include azalea, dangling catkins of alder, and bronze-toned ninebark 'Coppertina'.
2. **SUPPORTING INGREDIENT:** Typically shorter than the structural foliage, it mimics the framework and creates a nest for the next ingredient, such as mint and lady's mantle.
3. **TEXTURAL INGREDIENT:** These mimic the shape of the structure, but add movement and color. Curving or weeping foliage such as angelica, honeysuckle, and sweet peas are ideal.
4. **SUPPORTING FLOWERS:** These add color and interest, and are typically stems with sprays of blossoms or clusters of blooms. Examples include 'Yazz' and 'Prosecco' narcissus, buttercream-colored La Belle Pastel Mix ranunculus, and ruffled Rocco Frill Mix pansies. Supporting flowers add height and reach and give the arrangement a lush look.
5. **FOCAL FLOWERS:** These are the featured blooms and as such are larger and showier than the other flowers and should be placed at varying heights with room to breathe. Anemones, ranunculus, tulips, and narcissus have the scale, shape, and color for maximum impact.
6. **AIRY ACCENTS:** This is where you add magic and surprise with, as Erin says, "feathery grasses, shimmering pods that sparkle in the slightest breeze, and tiny ethereal flowers." Even common velvet grass and panic grass look like fairy floss in a well-appointed bouquet.

more cut flowers. People locally heard about the cut flowers and began buying them.” They picked up a few high-end local retailers, created floral designs for weddings, and got a grant to trial roses from the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers. All along, Erin wrote for garden publications and blogged about her life and work and soon expanded into hosting classes.

“When I first started, it was really hard to find information all in one place,” Erin says. “I had to comb through so many resources to do my online research, and I also went through a lot of trial and error. I don’t want growing flowers or seasonal floral design to be that hard for others. Early on, I decided I wanted to share what I’d learned so others can find it more easily,” she says. “I was also very lucky to meet people who helped me learn along the way. They would share everything they knew with me when they didn’t have to. I want to do the same and pay it forward.”

Erin’s test garden is mind-boggling in scope and beauty. Erin looks at a flower’s shape, disease resistance, and enhanced ability to grow in a wide range of climates, but her real priority is selecting colors people crave. Her fervent pursuit of the perfect-colored bloom has led her to trial more than a thousand flower varieties per year. This past year Floret trialed flowers from seed sellers, along with varieties from their own breeding program: 45 tulips, more than 90 daffodils, 850 dahlias, 48 zinnias, 45 China asters, and more than 50 sweet peas. Out of these test groups, Erin selects anywhere from a few dozen to ~150 (in the case of dahlias) of her favorite varieties from each flower type and passes them along to a specialty production farmer who develops larger quantities of seeds, tubers, or bulbs that Floret eventually packages and sells online. This approach not only yields more inventory for fans to purchase, but it allows Erin to stick to what she does best: inspiring, educating, and growing gorgeous flowers.

To ramp up the quantity of plants available, Floret bought a new farm with 19 farmable acres abutting their original 2-acre farm. Floret has been moving operations out of their home and into a barn and farmhouse on the new farm. “It’s a permanent home for the business. Before, everything

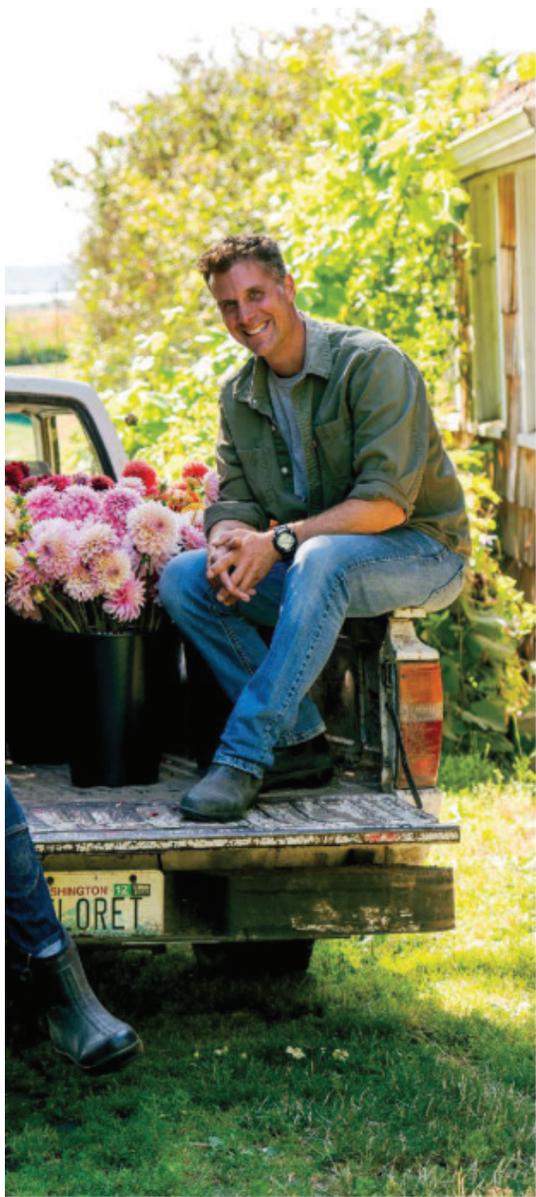
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was done out of our home. I’m hoping we’ll have a little more separation between farm space and personal space. We still grow on the original farm, but now we can build greenhouses, set up operations efficiently, and trial a lot more plants.”

This willingness to share has made Erin the face of the homegrown flower movement—inspiring thousands to grab a shovel and get at it. Her advice for budding growers: “Just start. There’s no right time. There’s no right size or space. Pick a spot; prepare the soil with good amendments; and plant something. When I lived in the city, I’d plant flowers along the walkway to our tiny house. I also planted flowers in pots on the deck. You don’t have to have a farm to start growing things. Growing will start to snowball if you really enjoy it.”





(Left) Erin and Chris Benzaiken at a rare moment of rest with a truckful of dahlias; (below) Floret Flower Farm's annuals in a Skagit Valley golden hour



BOOT, GLOVES, HOE AND CAMERA: COURTESY OF COMPANIES



Erin's Go-To Garden Gear

FARM BOOT

"For farming, I love Bogs Classic Mid boot," says Erin. The Oregon-based company's farm boot is lightweight, 100 percent waterproof, and features cushioned insoles. \$120; bogsfootwear.com

ATLAS NITRILE GLOVES

Nitrile is tougher than rubber and boasts a higher puncture resistance. The nylon liner is super flexible and lets your hands breathe. \$18 for four; palmflex.com

ARS TOOLS

The iconic red handled snips, pruners, and pocket saws are compact, sturdy, and can be used to scale down sturdy branches, stems, and grasses. Prices vary; arscorporation.com

COLLINEAR HOE

"The best tool for weeding is the standard collinear hoe with a fixed blade from Johnny's Selected Seeds," says Erin. \$50; johnnyseeds.com

MASON JARS

"It's also good to keep glass vases

or mason jars for those times when you want to give flowers away but don't want to fret about having a vase returned." \$10; webstaurantstore.com

FULL FRAME DSLR

"I'm posting around 75 percent of what's on our Instagram channel with photos taken on my iPhone," says Erin. "But the dreamy images with great light are Chris' photographs with the big camera—a Canon 5D Mark III." \$2799; usa.canon.com