



GROW

A STUNNING
BOUQUET OF FRESHLY
CUT DAHLIAS

Bouquets!

**A well-planned
flower-cutting
garden promises
beautiful blooms
all season long.**

BY MARE-ANNE JARVELA

EVEN IF

you have only a few containers on a sunny deck or a small garden plot in the backyard, you can grow bunches of beautiful flowers if you apply the tips and tricks of master flower farmer Erin Benzakein of Floret Flower Farm in Mount Vernon, Washington.

Where you live and the length of your growing season will dictate which flowers will grow and thrive in your garden. For example, in northern Vermont, cool-weather blooms like sweet peas are a good choice; if you live in the hot high desert, you need to avoid cool-weather favorites or grow them under shade cloth. Most annual flowers prefer full sun and need at least 6 hours of direct sunlight a day. But if you have mostly shade, there are varieties that thrive in those spots.

The most economical way to begin is by growing annual flowers from seeds. A small investment in seeds can reward you with an abundance of flowers in just a few months, enabling you to take best advantage of your growing season. (See our frost dates page at Almanac.com/frost to learn the number of growing days, on average, between your last spring and first autumn frost.) Starting early with indoor seedlings will produce larger transplants that,

when planted outdoors, will have a better chance of surviving and competing with weeds than seeds that are started in the ground.

Do not let lack of space deter you, if you dream of a cutting garden. Most plants need only a small amount of space to thrive in the garden. In fact, if you increase the number of plants in your flower bed, their foliage will quickly cover the soil and shade out weeds—saving you time that would have been spent on weeding.

Before you start transplanting in the spring, amend your soil with about 4 inches of compost and a general organic fertilizer, working it into the soil (do not simply lay it on top).

Consistent watering is very important for happy flowers. After you get the transplants into the ground, keep the soil evenly moist but not soggy.

If you want to grow as many blooms as possible and have beautiful bouquets from spring to fall, practice succession planting with different varieties of seasonal flowers. As soon as one variety is done blooming, have another one ready to plant in its place. Choose varieties with long stems and a productive growth habit. *(continued)*

**ERIN BENZAKEIN
OF FLORET FLOWER
FARM WITH A
BOUQUET CUT
FROM HER GARDEN**



INDOOR SEED-STARTING SIMPLIFIED

- Read the seed packet to learn how many weeks before your last frost you should start. Do not plant the seeds too early.
- Eliminate any air pockets by tamping down seed-starting mix into your containers.
- Moisten the seed-starting mix prior to adding your seeds.
- Plant only one type of flower seed in a tray or container and mark the name of the flower and date sown on a plant tag.
- Cover seeds with fine vermiculite to help soak the water into the soil.
- Use bottom heat to get your seeds started. Propagation mats work great. Once seeds have sprouted, move them off the mat.
- If you cover a tray or container with plastic, make sure to remove it as soon as the plants have germinated.
- Water the seedlings from the bottom, if possible. This keeps water off the leaves and prevents problems with fungus and disease.
- If you are using grow lights, be sure that they are no more than 3 inches above the plants.
- "Harden off" your plants before transplanting them outdoors; they need to gradually adjust to the outside. Place them for a few hours every day in a protected spot out of direct sun and bring them in at night. Each day, expose them to a little more sunlight and wind until they are able to be outside all day.

ERIN'S FAVORITE FLOWERS

Here are a few of Erin Benzakein's top picks for sun and shade. They will take you through the seasons and make fantastic arrangements.

SUN-LOVING FLOWERS

The following plants are listed in order of bloom time, spring to fall.

- **Iceland poppies:** These pretty, papery blooms come in many colors. They appear in the spring, last through midsummer, and can be packed tightly into a small amount of space. Start indoors in early spring or direct-sow seeds in the garden in the fall.

- **Sweet peas:** These climbers are perfect for small spaces. Plant in the spring in cooler climates and in the fall in warm regions. Soak the seeds in water for 24 hours before sowing and add extra compost to the soil when transplanting. Remove spent flowers and seedpods to ensure more blooms.

- **Zinnias:** These colorful cut-and-come-again summer favorites are highly productive and easy to grow. They love heat and come in many shapes and colors. In bouquets, they can last a week.

- **Cosmos:** Cosmos can be direct-seeded in the garden (poor soil? no problem!); germination takes 7 to 21 days. Water sparingly. Plant in spring and again about a month after the first seeding. The more you cut them, the more they bloom. The blooms come in pure white and in shades of yellow, orange, pink, and lavender.

- **False Queen Anne's lace (aka bishop's weed):** This is a very productive hardy annual filler plant with white-green lacy umbels (flower



ICELAND POPPIES (ABOVE) AND COSMOS (RIGHT) ARE TWO OF ERIN'S TOP PICKS.


heads). These flowers are invaluable in spring/early summer bouquets but poisonous to pets.

- **Sunflowers:** There are two types of sunflowers, branching and nonbranching. Branching sunflowers will produce lots of flowers over a long period of time but need room to grow. Nonbranching, single-stem sunflowers can be planted close together. Plant pollenless varieties for bouquets.

- **Dahlias:** These late-summer beauties come in many colors and shapes. Plant the tubers in the spring about a foot apart. When the plants reach a foot tall, snip off 3 to 4 inches of the center stem for bushier growth and longer stems.

SHADE-LOVING FLOWERS

The following plants are listed in alphabetical order. (continued)

A woman with her hair pulled back, wearing a black and white striped shirt, stands in a field of white daisies. She is holding a large, vibrant bouquet of flowers that includes pink, yellow, and white roses, peonies, and various greenery. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a bright sky.

FLOWERS ALWAYS
MAKE PEOPLE BETTER,
HAPPIER, AND MORE
HELPFUL; THEY ARE
SUNSHINE, FOOD, AND
MEDICINE FOR THE SOUL.

*-Luther Burbank,
American horticulturist (1849-1926)*

ERIN AND THE FOUNDING OF FLORET FLOWER FARM

In 2001, Erin Benzakein, with her husband Chris and two children, left Seattle and moved to a small farm in Washington State's Skagit Valley for a simpler lifestyle through which they could connect with nature every day. The first year, they planted a small vegetable garden with a few flowers between the rows. In the second year, they replaced the vegetables with just flowers. The year after that, they dug up a small orchard to add space for even more blooms.

Later came greenhouses, and eventually the family's tiny backyard cutting garden grew into a 2-acre flower farm and design studio that supplied hundreds of thousands of flowers to markets, CSAs, and special events. The gardens are bursting with flowers that reflect the seasons, from fragrant sweet peas in the spring to beautiful dahlias in the fall.

Today, research and education are at the heart of family-run Floret Flower Farm, from extensive field trials to multiday workshops about farming methods as well as how to arrange seasonal flowers and plants.

Erin has also developed the Floret seed line. In her online store, she offers more than 100 hard-to-find flower varieties, plus dahlia tubers, spring-flowering bulbs, and supplies. Erin recently published her first book, *Floret Farm's Cut Flower Garden: Grow, Harvest, and Arrange Stunning Seasonal Blooms* (Chronicle Books, 2017). The Floret Flower Farm Web site can be found at www.floretflowers.com.



- **Columbine:** This favorite of hummingbirds comes in many colors.

- **Foxglove:** A biennial, this creates a leafy rosette one year and a flower spike the next.

- **Hellebore (aka Christmas or Lenten rose):** A heavy feeder, this will grow well with less than 6 hours of sun a day.

FOLIAGE AND FRAGRANCE

Foliage plants are a must when making bouquets, and herbs add scent.

- Ornamental grasses bring visual interest to bouquets, and many are easy to grow: 'Frosted Explosion' switchgrass (*Panicum elegans*) is very productive and has silvery seed heads. Millets, derived from cereal grains, come in many varieties and can be direct-seeded in the garden. Erin's favorites are 'Highlander' and 'Red Jewel'.

- Basil, bee balm, mint, and scented geraniums add fragrance and are easy to grow. Plant mint in pots to avoid its spreading habit.

CUTTING FOR KEEPS

Harvest flowers before the buds have fully opened.

THE ART OF FLOWER ARRANGING (ABOVE); SELECTING THE PERFECT HOLLYHOCKS (RIGHT)

Cut blooms during the coolest time of the day (morning or evening).

Remove leaves from the lower half of the stems and place stems in a bucket with cool water.

Let the flowers sit in the bucket for a couple of hours or longer before arranging.

Recut stems at an angle with a sharp knife before placing the flowers in a vase.

SECRETS TO EYE-CATCHING ARRANGEMENTS

Some people make arrangements look easy. With these guidelines, you can, too.

Use a fluted vase for a loose and natural look. Plan to arrange the flowers to be about three times as tall and twice as wide as the vase. Erin suggests the following combinations, with these examples:

Fillers (50 percent)—greens that provide textural interest; bells of Ireland, basil, scented geraniums

Disks (30 percent)—round-headed flowers (great for filling in holes in the bouquet); cosmos, small zinnias, rudbeckia

In combination (20 percent)—

- focal blooms: the main flowers, these are typically large and showy, and a bouquet is built around these; sunflowers, large zinnias, dahlias

- spikes: colorful vertical flowers that accent the focal blooms; snapdragons, gladiolus, foxglove, hollyhocks

- airy elements: delicate flowers or leaves that add whimsy and movement to a bouquet; grasses, scabiosa, poppy pods, oregano ■

Mare-Anne Jarvela, former senior editor of The Old Farmer's Almanac and editor of the Garden Guide, has bouquet'd many a beautiful bloom from her Munsonville, New Hampshire, gardens.