

Say it with British flowers

Growing your own cut flowers is set to be all the rage this year. Get ahead of the game with the advice **Naomi Slade** gathered at a course run by Green and Gorgeous, a floristry company that grows all its blooms on Blighty turf



Hot zinnias and cleome combine cheerfully in this oasis-filled tin

DOWN A long, quiet lane in Oxfordshire a brilliant innovation in cut flowers is underway. The brainchild of florist Jo Wise and former garden designer Rachel Siegfried, Green and Gorgeous specialises in naturalistic, fresh floral designs using the sort of delicate blooms rarely seen in the high street florist.

They grow their own seasonal, organic flowers and while the likes of foxgloves and garden roses don't transport well, for their local operation this is not a problem.

"When we first started out, we did our research at farmers' markets" Rachel told me, "It turned out that people like the natural 'English country' look. They want scent and nostalgia, flowers like cornflowers, sweet peas and roses, and they like them to be guilt-free too."

In contrast to Rachel and Jo's sustainable principles, most cut flowers are imported from



The triumphant floristry class with their hand-tied bouquets of all shapes and sizes

Kenya, Hawaii, Ecuador and Columbia. High in air-miles, they deplete local resources with negative environmental consequences and because they are not a food they are laden with pesticides and fungicides.

"At farmers' markets, we have a big banner saying 'Organic Flowers'. People sometimes ask 'Why bother? You don't eat them!' I tell them 'it's not for your benefit, it for the environment!'" declared Rachel.

Breaking the rules

This willingness to push boundaries and break rules is what makes them different. Despite difficult economic conditions business is good and between April and October they are much in demand for their gloriously countrified

“On a domestic scale, a 9ft patch will give a lot of flowers”

wedding flowers.

Recently bitten by the 'cut flowers' bug, I was eager to attend their floral planning, growing and arranging course so I joined a friendly group that included plant addicts, interested amateurs and professional gardeners to find out more.

Kicking off with 'Planning Your Patch', Rachel whizzed through some gardening basics and recommendations from her own experience: She uses plenty of muck and mulch, protecting the soil with green manure in winter. She views her flowers as crops, planting rows north to south for maximum sunshine.

The plants are fed regularly and for cut flowers normal spacing can be reduced by a third. Annuals are best if you have perennial weed problems or tight budgets, but for low maintenance go with perennials.

Next, a swift circuit of the garden to check out the essential watering system and the bean netting that supports plants both vertically and horizontally, while Rachel answered individual questions on the hoof. "On a domestic scale, three to four square metres will give lots of flowers, Rachel told us, "Invest in great plants and great bulbs, and go to garden ▶



Who would have believed that ordinary garden mint is one of Rachel's floral mainstays



Rachel Siegfried and Jo Wise have found a niche supplying organic, locally grown flowers

FLOWERS IN A TEACUP HOW TO DO IT:

TRY
THIS



STEP 1
Choose and trim your plants, keeping them in water: here Jo uses David Austin roses, scabious and clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*)



STEP 2
Select a suitable container – Jo uses a dainty china cup and saucer. Attach the pin-holder to the container with waterproof green adhesive clay roll. Both are available from theessentialscompany.co.uk. Then add water. The pin-holder keeps the stems together and weighted down



STEP 3
Add the 'filler' plant material as a background



STEP 4
Add the dominant flowers and naturalising element



Perfect English country garden informality in a teacup



Sombre-coloured plants like *Salpiglossis* 'Royale Chocolate' (half hardy annual) are a popular and sophisticated choice

“Country flowers can still be stylish. I love the sombre colours”

◀ shapes and forms give a bouquet its character, even before you get to colour. There are delphiniums with their dramatic spires and dominant, ball-shaped dahlias and daisies. Naturalistic umbels like ammi fill gaps, while plumes like phlox add informality; grasses form gauzy veils.

Rachel and Jo work with a colour palette of hot, cool, sweet and sombre: reds, blues, sugary pinks and dark, rich plums. “Just because you are into country garden flowers doesn't mean you have to do baskets and froth! You can still be stylish – I love the sombre colours,” said Rachel.

“Go with what feels right.” she advised waving a handful of fruit-salad-coloured zinnias. “I'm a bit of a clasher. I have few set rules but I do believe that odd numbers of flowers looks best.”

Let loose to choose our own flowers in the incredible dahlia crop, I started to panic. Suddenly I didn't know if I

was coming or going, clashing or complementing. As we clumsily put our bouquets together, my crisis of taste continued but the more elements I added the better it got.

With such fantastic plant material it was impossible to mess it up too much and I started getting into it, adding great horns of molucella (bells of Ireland) topping it off with a particularly large dahlia.

Driving away, with my pot of interesting new cuttings, a tray of flower seeds and my scruffy bouquet propped precariously on the front seat, I was filled with inspiration and a sense of achievement. It was a rare opportunity to do something exciting and different and I shall definitely include a cutting garden in my plans for next year. In fact, I might even have to get married so they can do the flowers. ■

NAOMI SLADE is a garden writer based in Berkshire

Rachel offers support and advice as her pupils get to grips with practical floristry



CUTTING GARDEN PLANNER

■ SPRING

Tulip; small, scented narcissi, peonies; hesperis (sweet rocket)

■ SUMMER

Foxgloves, sweetpeas, cornflowers, sweet Williams

■ AUTUMN

Cleome, dahlias, zinnias, *Panicum* 'Frosted Explosion'

■ WINTER

Allium christophii (seedheads) honesty, hellebores, *Arum italicum*

“You should always think ahead and plant for a continuous crop”

◀ shows to experience the plants first hand.”

In the garden, delphiniums tower next to zingy euphorbia; roses are punctuated with heliotrope, there are banks of sunflowers and every now and again, a surprise row of rhubarb or courgettes. It was by far the prettiest crop I had seen.

The soil is heavy, fertile, limy clay and although a working nursery when they arrived, it is in a shade-free frost pocket. New windbreaks of shrubs like phytocarpus provide both shelter and floristry material but Rachel is reduced to growing her shade and moisture-loving thalictrum near a leaky water butt behind a shed.

She is blunt about her solution to the inevitable pests and diseases. “What do I do? I grow a lot! But you can lose a whole crop to mildew, flea beetle or caterpillars, you just have to throw it on the compost

heap and grow something else.”

She is big on growing for continuity, avoiding gaps through good planning. “Think ahead,” she advised, “Plant bulbs in autumn and then you can overplant with biennials – sweet Williams, Icelandic poppies, foxgloves. When these die back, get rid of them and get dahlias in.”

After coffee we all piled into the greenhouse for a spot of practical seed sowing and taking cuttings. “Trim to size, cut off any snags and bung it into the cutting compost!” demonstrated Rachel, cheerfully, sounding for all the world like a horticultural Jamie Oliver. Busting my cuttings in as directed, I could feel my confidence grow.

Set up by a delicious home-grown lunch with Greek courgette pie and almond and raspberry meringue, we tackled ‘The Palette of Plants’.

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