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GARDEN SERIES: Part 6
THE PLANT COLLECTORS

PETAL POWER

Continuing our series on specialist plant growers, CLARE FOSTER talks to Erin Benzakein of Floret Farm in the Skagit Valley, Washington, whose prize flower crop is 850 glorious varieties of dahlia



OPPOSITE Hundreds of varieties, including orange ball dahlias 'Beatrice' and 'Hy Suntan' and the pink informal decorative dahlia 'Sonic Boom', are trialed in the dedicated flower fields.
THIS PAGE The extremely popular *Dahlia* 'Café au Lait'





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erin Benzakein believes that flowers can transform people's lives. Through a series of beautiful books and via her website and Instagram posts, the green-fingered American has in fact become something of a global star, extolling the virtues of growing cut flowers and also becoming a figurehead for other growers. Her successful brand is built round an aesthetic that is both glorious

and wholesome, conveying a way of life that many aspire to.

It all started when she moved from Seattle to the Skagit Valley with her young family in 2001, and planted a small vegetable and flower garden in her back yard. The tiny but abundant plot gained a local reputation and soon people were asking to buy her blooms. Erin dug up the orchard so she could plant more and, before long, the small garden had grown into a thriving two-acre cut-flower farm and design studio.

In 2017, Erin and her husband Chris bought a farm bordering their own, expanding this time into 24 acres, and transforming the run-down blueberry farm into flower fields that now erupt into colour each year. One of their principal crops is the dahlia. In the introduction to her new book on dahlias, due out next spring, Erin writes: 'Of all the flowers I have ever grown, dahlias are my favourite... they come in a dazzling rainbow of colours, they produce an abundance of flowers for cutting from midsummer to the first autumn frost, and the range of shapes and sizes available is staggering.'

Floret Farm currently cultivates around 850 dahlia varieties in a field of just over an acre, but the focus these days for Erin is more on seed production, research and hybridisation than growing for cutting. 'I'm devoting my time to breeding new cut-flower varieties that will help give growers an advantage in the marketplace,' she says. 'It's interesting that most dahlia breeding in the past has been for the

judging bench at shows. With cut flowers, the demand is more for the soft, muted colours, the pastels and unusual muddled tones.'

Knowing exactly what works best in today's flower arrangements, Erin is on a mission to find the perfect dahlia. 'Last year, we grew 13,000 seedlings and saved maybe 200, which I'm evaluating this year,' she says. 'Dahlias are octoploids, which mean they have more chromosomes than other plants, so each seedling is completely different from the mother plant. It's a long process, but it's so exciting to think that we get to choose a new generation of plants.'

The dahlias that they are trialling in the field are those they will breed from, set out in rainbow order in the colours that Erin knows people want. Apricots, blush pinks, creamy whites and pale yellows

give way to what she calls 'sunset tones' in copper and bronze, then raspberry-pink and purple, and finally to the deep maroon-blacks. From this cornucopia of colours and shapes, there is something to appeal to everyone. Some of the varieties that Floret grows are not currently available in the UK, but many are and similar varieties can often be tracked down at nurseries such as Halls of Heddon (halls-of-heddon.com) and Rose Cottage Plants (rosecottageplants.co.uk), or through the National Dahlia Collection (nationaldahlia-collection.co.uk), which sells mail-order tubers in spring.

Erin is particularly keen on the collerette (collarette in the US) dahlias, which suit the current trend for naturalistic planting schemes. 'They have an almost wildflower-like quality, unlike some other dahlias, and they are more delicate, with single blooms and a collar of ruffled petals. You can thread them in with other flowers and they give an arrangement such a beautiful look.'

Her top three collerettes are: 'Ferncliff Dolly' in sugar pink with a contrasting yellow ruffle; 'Appleblossom', which is the palest creamy apricot; and 'April Heather', which is pale yellow suffused with apricot. Other superb varieties for cutting (among the 360 that are mentioned in her forthcoming book) include the semi-cactus 'Henriette' with its softest salmon blooms, peachy-orange 'Pam Howden' – the most perfect waterlily type – and the supremely popular 'Café au Lait', which is Floret's most requested dahlia.

Erin has inevitably become an expert at growing these rewarding plants and is very happy to share all her practical experience. One of her most useful tips is to pinch the plants out when they are 30-40cm tall. 'If you snip off the top third of growth, it encourages the plant to branch, which means ultimately you will get about three times as many flowers from one plant,' she explains.

In previous years, she has lifted all her dahlias, but this year she will leave half of them in the ground under a thick mulch of straw and landscape fabric to protect the tubers from frost damage. Those that are lifted are divided in winter before

they are carefully stored – in vermiculite, peat moss or even wrapped in clingfilm to stop them drying out – until it is time to plant them again in late spring. Erin's parting advice is very simple: 'In the growing season, just keep cutting and they will keep giving. You can be ruthless – cut deep into the plant, take longer stems and then the next round of stems will be longer.' When you see the images of Erin's bountiful harvest arranged in heavenly colour-themed abundance, you will no doubt want to recreate some of her magic yourself □

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Floret: floretflowers.com. Erin's book 'Discovering Dahlias' (Chronicle Books) will be published in March 2021



OPPOSITE TOP ROW FROM LEFT Semi-cactus dahlia 'Henriette'. Anemone-flowered *D.* 'Polka'. One of Erin's top collerettes, *D.* 'Ferncliff Dolly'. MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT The dramatic anemone-flowered *D.* 'Mambo'. Distinctive star dahlia 'Honka Fragile'. The informal decorative or dinnerplate dahlia 'Penhill Watermelon'. BOTTOM ROW FROM LEFT Another of Erin's favourite collerettes, *D.* 'Appleblossom'. Waterlily dahlia 'Pam Howden'. Formal decorative dahlia 'Castle Drive'. THIS PAGE Erin likes to pick early in the morning to ensure the blooms are looking their best