

MARY JANES FARM®

THE AMERICAN ORGANIC ORIGINAL™

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EAT SAFE ... Eat Organic!

20
FALL HARVEST
RECIPES

putting *Summer*
to bed

SO YOU
WANT TO:

- *Be* a flower farmer?
... meet Erin p. 44
- *Run* rivers?
... meet Gail p. 76
- *Open* a B&B?
... meet Sherri p. 80

DON'T TOSS
those tired shoes & purses!
... clever remakes inside ➡➡

Life *in a*
Glass House
mosses under cover



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SO YOU WANT TO

BE A *Flower* FARMERby Ardis Eckel
photos by David E. Perry

From simple sweet peas to acres of brilliant blooms ... my, how Erin Benzakein's garden has grown! "When we moved here to the Skagit Valley north of Seattle, Washington, seven years ago, I was so excited just to have a veggie patch," Erin recalls. "For fun, I planted two 60-foot rows of sweet peas for a fragrant walk to the garden. And *that* turned into *this*."

This is two acres of English roses, decorative vines, pods, grasses, perennials, annuals, vegetables, and fruit. One acre is certified organic. All are plants Erin uses to design breathtaking bouquets that look like paintings by old-world masters and smell like heaven on earth.

(continued)





Erin stresses the importance of mentors when starting any new business. "Gretchen Hoytt of Alm Hill Gardens (below top) sells fabulous lilacs, peonies, and more at regional farmers' markets and has given me great advice; and Jan Roozen of Choice Bulb Farms (below middle), a sixth generation Dutch bulb farmer, sells incredible blooms at Seattle farmers' markets and around the world, and I love using his materials."



Lean, energetic, and 28 years old, Erin says, "From the time I was a tiny girl, I always wanted a plot of land. When my husband, Chris, and I moved here to the country, our daughter was a toddler, and our son not yet born. I was home all day with time to explore my interests. I also took a Master Gardeners' training, which helped so much by giving me a great broad overview and understanding of all parts of the garden."



Encouragement and inspiration has always come from Erin's father, an artist and the photographer who took these beautiful photos, and her mother, who owns an exclusive Seattle spa. "Creativity, exploring your passions, not judging new ideas that don't immediately make sense ... my parents raised us to think for ourselves and to go after what we're passionate about. I'm totally and completely obsessed with flowers. And I love to try on things that seem impossible."



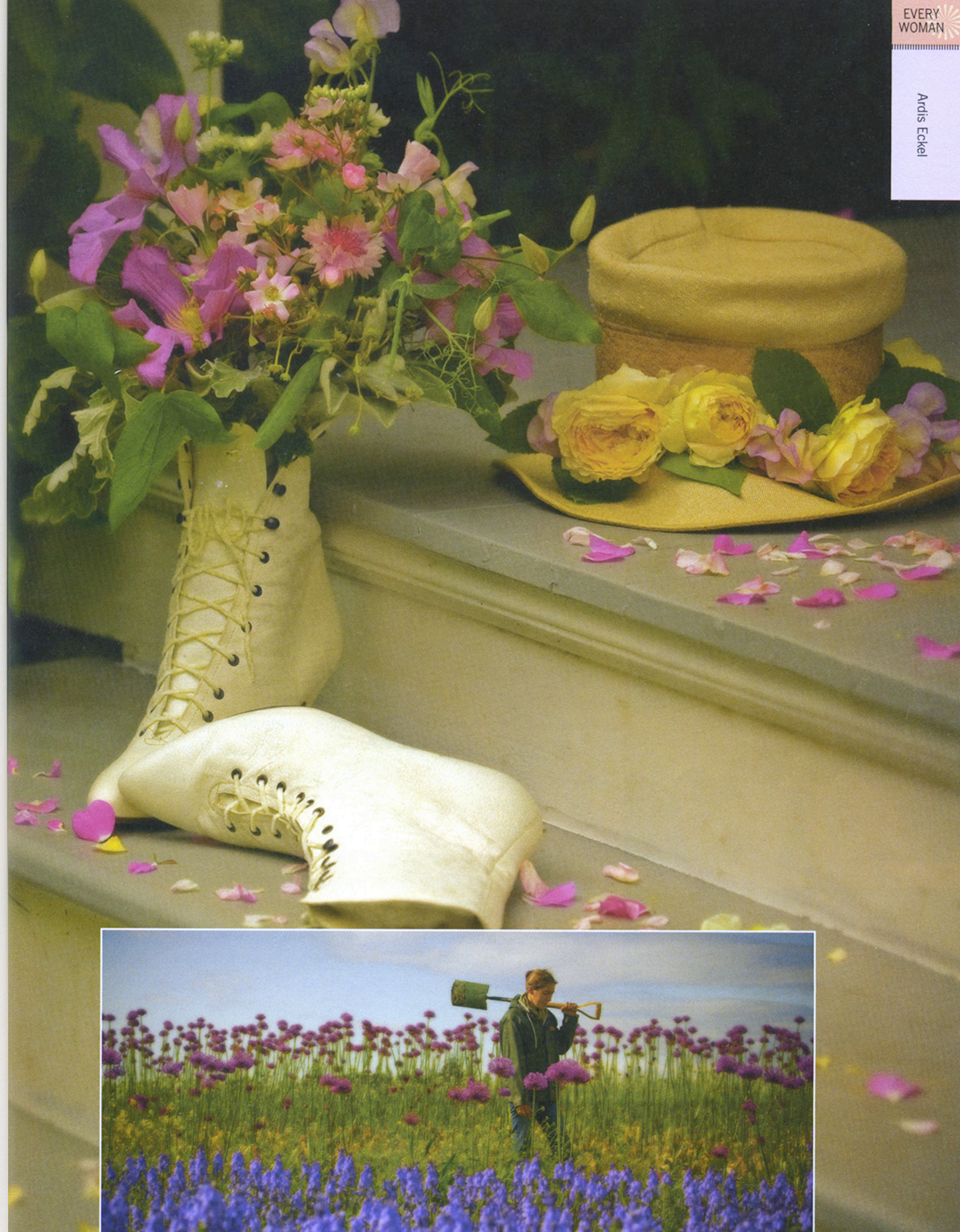
Erin's passion is contagious. Even her husband and children are mesmerized by her magical mission. "Chris put in all the irrigation and does the tractor work," she says. "At 5, Jasper loves to plant the vegetable garden and weed. And 8-year-old Elora is very into picking flowers and watching insects and hummingbirds."

Erin's garden and greenhouse yield enough seasonal materials to design bouquets for weddings, parties, and a subscription service for her mother's spa clients. She also supplies area florists, and this is her first year of selling wholesale to Whole Foods stores. "Finding sustainably-grown flowers is nearly





Learn more about Erin and her blooming business, Floret, at www.floretflowers.com. Erin's father, David Perry (www.davidperryphoto.com), has photographed many of Erin's blooms and provided the beautiful photos here. David has been a photographer for more than 30 years, completing assignments in every corner of the world. Pour a cup of coffee and peruse his entertaining and educational blog, "A Photographer's Garden Blog," at www.davidperryphoto.com/blog.html. As a team, Erin and David are in the early stages of creating THE book on flowers. Now THAT's a book I'll be first in line for! Erin also enlisted her friend, Joan McConnell, to style our cover photo and the "lady slipper" photo to the right. "She comes in with all these great props and tons of enthusiasm," Erin says, "and styles the subjects to reflect the mood and story."





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Erin's home is both her laboratory and her studio. "The house is constantly filled with bowls and jars of flowers with little notes on them, cut dates, and treatments I've used. Today I'm testing the vase-life of seven different roses. Elora cut sweet peas for the bathroom and kitchen. Our house is always filled with fragrance."

Outside, the garden has exploded. "I let the pruners lead me," she says with single-minded intensity. "I think it really is the flowers. It's working with incredible materials and colors. My favorite is when the finished arrangement looks like you just walked through a meadow, scooped up all these flowers and grasses, and then just plunked them in this fabulous vintage container."

Instead of the waxy, contrived look often evident in arrangements of chemically-treated blooms, Erin's bouquets are a natural delight. "Sweet peas, garden roses—they don't last so long. But a stem of lilies cut just when they're showing color—they last forever. Raspberry greens, over two weeks. That's why I favor mixing materials for the best bouquets."

Unexpected details can make the difference. Alpine strawberries. Cherry tomatoes. Decorative grasses. "When you're down on your belly weeding or with the camera, you notice all this stuff ... pea pods backlit by the sun, all the shapes and colors. You start to see how they can be used for a natural, free-flowing form."

Whatever the mix, Erin's creations are meant to be savored. "They are living things that just don't last that long. So carry the bouquet with you from room to room," she says. "Get full use. And when the rose petals fall, gather them up and float them in your bath."

For Erin, best of all is sharing her bounty. "Watching someone burst into tears when they see a bouquet or put their hand to their chest and take a moment ... it's like something opens inside, like their heart shifts. Flowers do that to people, especially women. Whether it's a huge arrangement or a little jar of sweet peas, they go to work like medicine. And it's the most incredible thrill to provide that gift."

Ferin says that while not everyone has the resources to make such varied arrangements, almost everyone has the opportunity to bring the outside inside. "When my mom walks through the park, she snips little tiny bits of this and that and later floats them in vintage goblets. One little flower or bit of green floated in front of you while you do the dishes—or giving yourself permission to go into the park or into the garden and snag a few little things to bring inside and enjoy—that's a chance to be in the moment, to really enjoy



"I'd rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck."

— Emma Goldman

