

Thoughtful... by design

How to use only seasonal and sustainable flowers and materials in your arrangements

HANNAH DUNNE

How would you feel about a sunflower if it bloomed in your garden all year round? As with tomatoes and bananas, we've become accustomed to buying cut summer blooms such as roses and hydrangeas throughout the year, and now even peonies are imported from high-tech greenhouses to be used in British winter bridal bouquets. Today, a new movement is bringing flowers back to their natural roots as more and more people are sourcing materials based on seasonality and sustainability; and using them to design thoughtfully.

We've been cutting flowers for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptians picked scented blooms to create entrancing perfumed displays, and flower arranging at home has continued around the world ever since.

Revered floral designer Constance Spry helped to turn flower arranging into a skill of real financial value when she opened her first shop in the late 1920s. Since then, easier international transport and globalisation has transformed the flower trade into a booming industry which is today worth over £2 billion and sees flowers cross borders at tremendous rates.

A wide variety of exotic flowers is now affordable and available all year round. In the garden we can usually only enjoy roses during summer, yet every month of the year they're readily available in bunches at the supermarket.

"I like to think about where it all began", explains



SHANE CONNOLLY & COMPANY

Shane Connolly, the acclaimed florist behind two royal weddings - HRH The Prince of Wales's and Prince William's - who works with the mindset of a gardener. If he's commissioned to create a display for a British wedding in May, his first thought asks which flowers will be naturally blooming outdoors in Britain that month. "The whole idea behind cut flowers is to bring nature inside, yet some modern designs are so far and detached from their natural origin that I sometimes wonder whether fabric or another more interesting material could have been used to create it instead," he says.

It's a view echoed by Yolanda Chiamarello who recently opened her eponymous London flower shop to discover locals were more seasonally-minded than expected. "To see flowers growing organically in a field and looking far from perfect, watching the way each stem is formed and each head lolls, really helps to understand their beauty even in their simplest form," she says. "Suddenly a bunch of trailing nasturtiums, just a weed in some eyes, becomes a thing of wonder. When I took some from my allotment and displayed them in the shop window I suddenly found each week people were asking for these more than all of the other flowers in the shop."

Sustainability is often labelled as unaffordable to the masses, but having a seasonal mindset is one of the simplest ways to start becoming a thoughtful flower buyer, and blooms that are in season are often cheaper than those that aren't. "I'm a passionate gardener, so I think



YOLANDA CHIARAMELLO, CHIARAMELLO PHOTOGRAPHY & FLORAL DESIGN

the fact that we only have snowdrops for two months of the year is what makes them special", Shane says. If you need flowers for an occasion, the first step is to think of the season before the colour scheme. He asks, "We do it with food, so why not flowers? Would you want fresh strawberries for Christmas lunch?"

UNDERSTAND YOUR INGREDIENTS

Shane likens floral design to food and believes cooking is its closest discipline, alongside gardening. "A good chef has knowledge of the ingredients themselves. He knows which vegetables are better steamed, boiled or roasted," says Shane. "He doesn't just know how to perfectly boil an egg, instead he understands that there are different ways to cook a quail's egg and a chicken's egg. It's about understanding the nature of the product."

When scrolling through Instagram, Shane doesn't take inspiration from the work of fellow florists. He certainly admires it but believes using it would essentially mean copying it. Instead, he is inspired by the work of chefs and garden designers, which alongside music, theatre and art provides an abundance of original ideas that can be translated into flower design. He explains, "If you want to work with the colour red, don't look at the way florists are using red flowers. Instead, look at a Van Gogh painting and think about how he uses it."

THE SUSTAINABLE 'LOOK'

Society today is far more aware of sustainability in all aspects of life, and wedding flowers are no exception; Princess Eugenie requested a 'plastic free' wedding last year. The look and style that naturally comes with this ethos is now a huge trend not just because of its environmental credentials but because of its aesthetics. People are looking for wiggly stems, unusual textures and shapely materials that appear gathered and foraged.

Yolanda explains, "When you use flowers like this, each flower and piece of foliage can speak for itself. It has bend and shape, it isn't straight and rigid. It's these imperfections that make it a thing of beauty."

Together with Australian florist Rita Feldmann, Shane is championing a movement that is raising awareness of the negative impact that floral foam has on the planet.

YOLANDA'S SUMMER IDEAS TO TRY AT HOME

"Using one type of flower or foliage en masse is enough to create a stunning arrangement; a whole vase of trailing sweetpeas or a tall vase of full height rosehips will create a real show stopper, as will a tall vase of beautiful stems of oak or blossom cut from a tree."

"A collection of different sized vases or ceramics can be found in junk shops. Display them together with stems placed at varied heights, using flowers such as sunflowers, dahlias, garden roses, climbing scented vine or scented geraniums. Heaven. My favourites are nasturtiums tumbling down from a vase, bending and winding around each other. A real thing of beauty."



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Developed for easy insertion of stems, when floral foam breaks down it remains a microplastic forever to sit in landfill. "This has no part in sustainable design", says Shane, sharing his passion about the cause. "A floral design is a song of praise to nature which lacks all integrity if there's a great lump of plastic sitting underneath it."

Thoughtful design means letting the materials alone impress and allowing nature to rule. After selecting seasonal ingredients, think carefully about the container. Then, rather than dreaming up an abstract, artificial shape and moulding flowers into it, try using chicken wire or a bed of twigs. It's not about looking for one alternative method but just as we have done for thousands of years already, it's about building structures that let the flowers speak for themselves and experimenting with creative ways to work with natural materials.

SHANE'S SEASONAL SPECIALS

Shane shares his top choice flowers for each season in the year.

- SPRING:** narcissi and tulips
- SUMMER:** garden roses
- AUTUMN:** berries, chrysanthemums and dahlias
- WINTER:** mistletoe

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