

Garden to table

Beautiful centerpieces and bouquets can be as close as your own backyard — and your neighbor's

BY LAUREN VIERA

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Foodies are familiar with the term slow: The opposite of fast food, it's the culture of embracing locally grown, locally made produce and ingredients (often grown organically) by supporting farmers and culinary artisans. "Slow Flowers" is both the title of garden writer and lecturer Debra Prinzing's new book (St. Lynn's Press), and the practice she adopted for a full calendar year to demonstrate that what we put in our vases, just like what we put on our plates, can be beautifully harvested from local resources.

"You have to choose to live in the seasons," says Prinzing. "We want our food to reflect the seasons; the natural extension is that our centerpiece should as well. If you see a flower in the dead of winter that you know doesn't grow at that time of year, it's a bit of a discordant."

Picking up where her last book, "The 50 Mile Bouquet: Seasonal, Local and Sustainable Flowers" (St. Lynn's Press, 2012), left off, Prinzing constructed "Slow Flowers" by making a bouquet every week, all year long using only flora and foliage available in her garden or region. "My experiment," she writes in the introduction, "turned into a season-by-season, week-by-week book of ideas and inspiration for gardeners and DIY floral designers." We asked Prinzing for tips to plan flowers for entertaining and decorating that can be largely drawn from gardens.

What's the best example of incorporating slow flowers into everyday entertaining?

"The best way for people



Lilacs, peonies and poppies are just a few of the garden flowers that can make great centerpieces for entertaining.

to teach themselves is this scenario: 'I'm having a dinner party tonight. What do I do for a centerpiece?' You can't plan ahead. My girlfriend just did this the other day: She had these stemless champagne flutes lined up in the center of the table, and just clipped whatever was in bloom in her yard. One of this, one of that. It was so evocative, just one of each — one daffodil, one little fiddlehead fern that was starting to uncurl, and so forth — nothing like you'd find at a flower shop, but it reflected

the moment. That's what hosts and hostesses can do if they embrace the slow flower mandate. It's a philosophy; you just have to try it."

What's a good way to find out what's in season that we can work with?

"If you don't have any idea of where to start, you can kind of give yourself a ... field trip: Go to your local botanical garden and see what's in bloom now; everything is tagged. You could also go to a garden center, which will be geared up to

sell products in bloom. You might find that you forgot about a certain varietal and didn't realize you could use it now."

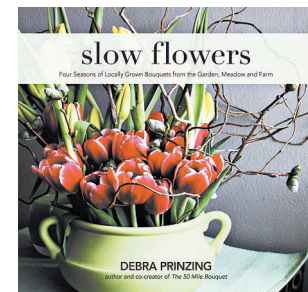
What about planning ahead for a special event down the line?

"If you have your own garden, it's a great starting point because if you're really ambitious, you could plant now for an event a year from now. I've known people, say, whose daughter is getting married next summer, so they're planting 10 lilac shrubs now to har-

vest next year. It's a bit harder with woody shrubs, but you could certainly do this kind of advance planning with something like peonies, for example."

Tell us about flower foraging.

"Foraging is a cute way of saying, look to your neighbors, look to your friends. If you know somebody — for example, you've befriended an arborist — and they're out on the job pruning, tell them, 'Don't throw those branches in the chipper; bring them to



me!' People love that natural garden look. There is a whole trend going on with flower foraging, especially on the West Coast — this idea that we don't need to be dependent upon big suppliers. To do that, we just have to look around and see what else is out there. ... I was outside pruning my cherry tree, which has a ton of beautiful, fluffy flowers. I'm putting them in this big urn and it's going to make a huge statement. You could never afford to pay a designer to fill that, like something you'd see in a hotel lobby."

Let's say we're limited on garden space — or talent. Can we still go slow?

"If you don't have a green thumb or the space or time, that's when I suggest going to the next level: befriending a local farmer, figuring out who in your community is growing cut flowers and will sell direct to you. Many farmers sell to both individuals and retail shops. At peak season, especially, they need to have multiple channels. They may charge a delivery fee to come into the city or coordinate a drop-off, but they're aware that there's a whole movement right now of wanting to go local. It's about bragging rights: 'I picked this flower myself;' or, 'I know the farmer who grew it.' That's a crossover from food as well; we're just connecting the dots on the flower side."