



# A FLORAL THEATRE

Sussex florist Georgia Miles puts frothy grasses, striking foliage and rich-hued blooms centre stage in her garden bouquets

**A**N ARRAY OF bright-coloured dahlias lie on a long table, their straight stems surrounded by rich foliage. Behind stand buckets filled with a myriad of flowers, including the delicate papery heads of *Physalis alkekengi*, the Chinese lantern, frothy *Alchemilla mollis* and white hydrangeas.

These are the tools of the trade for florist Georgia Miles, at the Sussex Flower School. Here, she teaches a range of students, from gardeners who want to improve their home-grown flower arrangements to professional florists wanting to enhance their skills.

## Setting the stage

Her flower arranging has changed considerably from the days when she used to teach at East Sussex's Plumpton College. Now her style is much freer than in the past with the main blooms being dahlias, sweet peas and English-grown flowers. "My arrangements used to feature very structured flowers, such as roses, carnations, spray chrysanthemums and lilies; typically the sort you'd easily find in supermarkets," says Georgia. "Now, all my flowers are British grown, many grown myself. I choose types that are not quite so uniform and, because of this, my arrangements have naturally evolved into a relaxed form.

"There's much more awareness now of growing your own flowers, and people are increasingly wanting to know how to make more relaxed, floral, foam-free hand-tied bouquets," she explains.

Foliage is important for these informal, country garden-style arrangements. "It's key, so grow, cut, forage or buy it," she advises. "Use it to create the structure of the design. The arrangement's height and width should be created from the foliage." Georgia uses a mixture of foliage at this time of the year, much of it from her own



Flowers spread out for use include dahlias in the foreground, purple drumstick allium and white hydrangeas.

garden. "I like to use plenty of leaves, as they are no longer new and so are stronger and last longer once picked. Beech, silver birch and cotinus are favourites. The slow growing pittosporum is also a useful addition." She is also fond of *Clematis vitalba*, often called old man's beard and found rambling over hedges in the countryside, and laurel. Both grow in her garden. She enjoys foraging for berries, which are also used in her arrangements to add colour and different textures.

It is only once this is done that the flowers are chosen. Georgia recommends ensuring there is a mixture of different forms, so they are not all linear or round shapes. "I use a three-tier system in my arrangements," she explains. "The focal flowers are round and include roses, dahlias and peonies. These draw the eye and are mixed with linear flowers, which are pointy, but not rigid, and provide height. Foliage is added, and grasses are >



Buckets of frothy grasses and flowers including ivy, thlaspi, chamelaucium, *Allium sphaerocephalon*, skimmia, *Panicum elegans* 'Frosted Explosion', physallis and quercus.



Georgia starts to build a bouquet using large foliage from *Quercus robur* with stems of eucalyptus.



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Chinese lanterns add a burst of fiery autumn colour above *Alchemilla mollis*.



Foliage adds height and width to an informal bouquet which includes hibernum and russet-red dahlias.



Berries and japonica contribute to the mix, some of it foraged, others grown in the garden.



Lush foliage punctuated by the rounded head of a hydrangea are bound together.

a particularly good choice, as they often have an interesting curve in the stem.

“I look for plants that aren’t symmetrical, or ones that have wiggly or twisted stems. Then I add what I call the bridesmaid, or supporting flowers, creating the third tier. These are lush and offer a transition between the focal and linear flowers.”

She particularly likes to use eustoma or lisianthus along with spray roses as these bridesmaid flowers. She suggests including anything in spray form with smaller heads.

The last step is to use what Georgia calls a filler flower. These fill any gaps, making the bouquet or arrangement look full and luxurious. “These are the flowers you might forget to buy in a shop because they seem boring and would not look pretty in a vase on their own, but they are really relevant, as they add shading to the arrangement,” she says.

Growing in abundance in her beds, in autumn, these include armfuls of pink and russet sedum, fluffy grasses, large hydrangea flowers and asters. All supply a froth of colourful flowers and foliage to perfect an autumnal bouquet.

#### A love of dahlias

Many of the flowers she uses in the school are grown in her own garden. Hidden behind brick walls, raised beds flourish. In the autumn, vibrant jewel-coloured dahlias, bright zinnias and large clumps of thriving perennials vie for attention.

Dahlias are Georgia’s passion and her favourite flower for cutting. “I love these flowers because there are hundreds of varieties, forms and colours,” she explains. “They are super fashionable and are cut and come again. Feed and water them well and each time one is cut, another will grow, right through to the first frost.” She grows hers in raised beds in the 50ft wide by 100ft long (15x30m) cutting garden.

“I think raised beds are easier for a cutting garden,” she says. “You can control the soil much more, and they are easier to access.” At the bottom of the South Downs, Eastbourne’s soil is chalky, with a tendency to be thin and alkaline. By growing in raised beds, she can provide better soil for plants that have to supply plenty of stems for cutting.

The walls provide both shelter and warmth for the plants, keeping the

temperature inside slightly higher than it would be if the garden was open to the elements. This, added to Eastbourne’s mild southerly seaside location, means the garden rarely experiences frost.

“It’s not frost free, but we don’t tend to have severe frosts,” Georgia explains. As a result, tender plants, such as her beloved dahlias, can be left in the ground to overwinter. In fact, she found she lost

more tubers through rotting when she did try to lift them, than when they were left in the beds during the colder weather. “I cut them down, make sure they are labelled, then I put a big pile, about half a foot, of well-rotted horse manure on top. After that, I just leave them be, and they are absolutely fine. It never gets so cold I have to worry, but if it did become very wet, I might be inclined to cover the beds with plastic sheeting.”

#### Range of colours

Because they are left in place, the dahlias increase in size annually, producing more and more blooms for cutting. Georgia also adds approximately 20 new varieties each year. “I love all their colours, but I like experimenting,” she says. “I normally go for the really dark red-black ones, but I have added lots of oranges, which I love.” Tangerine-flowered, dark-leaved ‘David



Dahlia ‘Night Queen’ reveals purplish-tinged petals in a deep crimson, adding rich autumn colour to displays.

## GEORGIA’S TIPS FOR LONGER LASTING FLOWERS

- The main factor in extending the life of flowers is cleanliness. Buckets and scissors need to be as clean as possible. Plastic buckets may be less attractive, but the plastic does not react with flower food. They can also be scrubbed with bleach.
- Flowers are cut first thing in the morning, or last thing at night. Directly after cutting, they are placed in buckets half full of water and flower food.
- Regardless of whether they are cut from the garden or bought, flowers should never be used straight away. Leaving them overnight in a cool dark place increases their longevity. Flowers that have been bought may have spent some time in transportation and need a drink, food and time to rest. Leaving them overnight helps them relax, becoming stronger as they fill with food.
- When arranging the next day, no more flower food is added. The flowers have already taken their fill of this food, which contains sugary glucose. Any sugar left in the water can encourage bacteria that turns water green. Instead, a Milton sterilising tablet is dissolved in the vase water. The water is changed regularly, topping up with another tablet or half-tablet each time.

Howard’ and vermilion-orange ‘Happy Halloween’ joined deep, velvety red cutting classics such as ‘Arabian Night’.

Added to these are pale, pink, white and peach varieties, such as ‘Café au Lait’. “I needed to have some pale colours for our wedding flower courses,” she says. “Now, I’ve got a whole new spectrum, and they are so abundant I can pick buckets of them every week.”

#### Annuals for variety

As well as the dahlias, her beds provide many other autumnal plants to arrange with them. Long-lasting annuals, such as zinnias, cosmos and multi-stemmed sunflowers, billow from her raised beds ➤

The raised beds in Georgia's Eastbourne garden overflow with many long-stemmed varieties and include blue caryopteris and red geum in the foreground.



Bright zinnia adds splashes of brightness to the beds.

along with perennials, such as sedums, rudbeckias, grasses and penstemons.

The cosmos in flower in autumn were sown in pots in spring and planted out. They tend to self-sow, so Georgia lifts seedlings that are not where they are wanted. She pots them up to grow on in the greenhouse until they are bigger. This keeps her beds free for earlier, quick-growing annuals.

Her vibrant zinnias were sown direct in late spring. She has started growing pastel-coloured zinnias as well as the bright ones. "I found that although they are very beautiful, the bright colours are less useful for flowers at the school. Brides don't want bright colours," she explains.

As well as mitigating the effects of frost, the walls keep out strong winds. She still supports all her flowers, using green pea netting stretched horizontally over the beds, to ensure unbroken, long stems.

### Passion for teaching

Georgia's enthusiasm for her school is infectious, and she is keen to spread the joy of working with flowers.

"I enjoy teaching and passing on knowledge and experience, and now my main focus is on supporting other people while they are carving out their own careers," she says. "I've had an interest in

gardening since being a child. However, it took having my own garden for me to recognise how passionate I was about the subject and that working with flowers was what I wanted to do. I never wanted to work in other people's gardens, just my own. I particularly enjoy the commercial side of what I do, running the business, which surprised me. I like bringing people together and I always bake a cake for the occasion. Growing flowers to cut has always been my main interest, mostly because I'm producing something that I can sell, which I'm very proud of."

Over the past two years, she has noticed that more people than ever are training to be florists, as they can trade online and no longer need a bricks and mortar shop. "I run career-changing courses for those who want to move into floristry from other jobs, and they are very popular, especially with the young and trendy," she says. "I started out only running two courses a year, but have now increased this to three, due to demand. There are lots of ways to market a business now, and this surge in people training to be florists is the result.

"I am lucky, as I get to do what I love every day and I thoroughly enjoy helping others to achieve the same goal. I can't imagine doing anything else." ■

## MEETING A GROWING NEED

Georgia opened her flower school in 2010, prompted by her discovery that there was a gap in the market. After running a business supplying wedding flowers, she had moved to teach floristry courses at East Sussex's Plumpton College.

"I realised there were no courses I would want to go on," she says. "Either you went to college or you became an apprentice, but there was nothing in between. I wanted to create a one-stop shop with flowers, food and tuition provided, where people could pick what they wanted to learn."

Her aim was to provide somewhere where students could choose courses to suit their needs and add to their skills as they progressed. Today, she offers bespoke one-to-one sessions and longer courses designed to help people do just that.

At first, the school operated from a building in the garden of her previous home in the village of Laughton. "When the school got bigger, it became obvious that we needed somewhere that wasn't at home, and at the same time we wanted to move house," she says. Since 2012, home has been an

Edwardian house in Eastbourne, with its walled garden, and the school is run from a workshop in nearby East Hoathly.

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