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Slow Flowers
JOURNAL

By Debra Prinzing

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Brooklyn Blooms Local

A farming foundation inspires Molly Culver's commitment to seasonal and sustainable design.

Molly Culver's floral aesthetic is deeply rooted in her background as a food and flower farmer, agricultural educator and sustainability advocate. Her style is nature-inspired, wild and romantic. "I want my designs to feel natural and untethered and just easy and loose, but also elegant," Culver says. She is as motivated by the urge to create beautiful floral designs as she is by a commitment to sustainability.

"Building a sustainable business was as important to me as sourcing flowers locally from regional farmers," Culver says. "I also strive to understand what I'm drawn to design, because I'm selecting the flowers that work best with my aesthetic."

After eight years juggling two equally demanding roles, as both the manager of the one-acre **Youth Farm** in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, N.Y. and owner of **Molly Oliver Flowers**, a wedding and event studio, she has shifted her full attention to floral design.

"My evolution was a natural outgrowth of being a flower

farmer and being a huge proponent of supporting local farmers and having an itch for creativity," she explains. At the Youth Farm, Culver taught adults and students about sustainable growing techniques in the heart of densely populated borough. She also oversaw flower production and sales.

"It's a beautiful thing to be deeply connected to a piece of land and to a community. I loved our early-morning harvests and being outdoors," she says. "Now, I'm finding new ways to enrich my life. It's possible I could go back to farming in some way, but for the time being, I'm excited to be focused on Molly Oliver Flowers."

Most of her clients' ceremonies take place in Brooklyn and Manhattan, as well as in surrounding areas such as the Hudson Valley, the Catskills, and on Long Island – places where many of the local flowers for Culver's designs are grown.

"For our corporate gigs, we're lucky to have great partners in certain venues who will recommend us when they have a client interested in local flowers and a way to reduce waste at

their event,” Culver explains.

Many couples that choose Molly Oliver Flowers for its emphasis on local blooms also select wedding venues that reflect a distinct sense of place. Popular venues include the **Brooklyn Winery**, a wine bar that produces their own wines; the **Brooklyn Grange**, a fully functioning production farm and event space on an industrial building rooftop; the **Green Building** and **501 Union**.

“It’s always fun when clients come up with creative and personal ideas for their weddings. We designed for one wedding in the back of a tattoo parlor; we’ve done a small wedding at the **Union Square Greenmarket**,” she says.

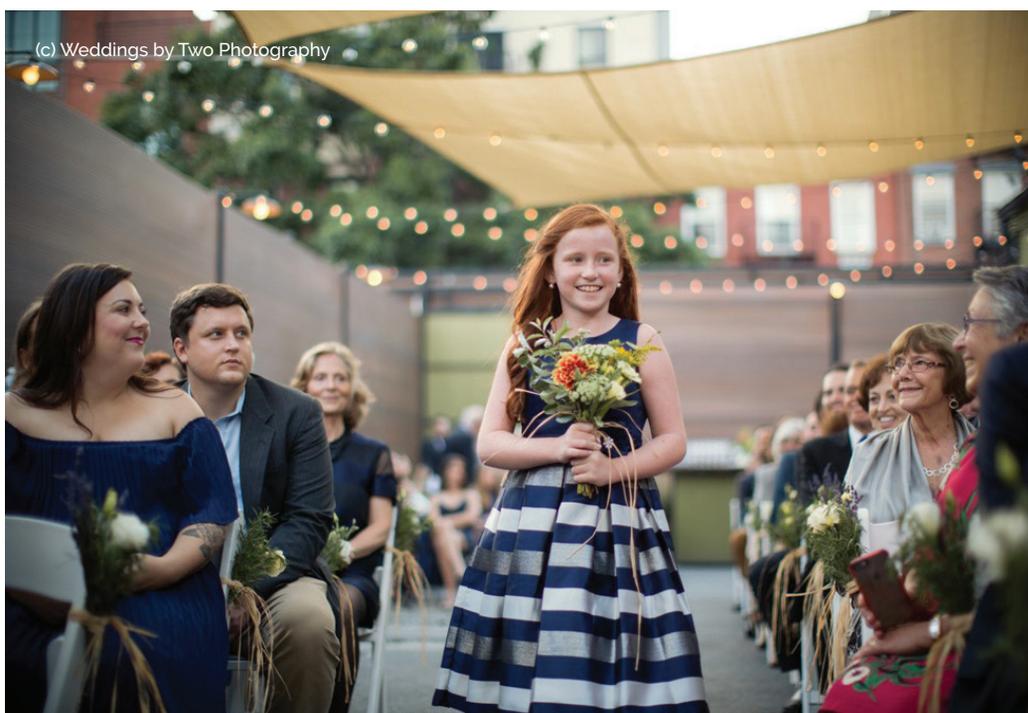
Culver works from a 600-square-foot studio in a large industrial building, which houses artists and makers in Brooklyn’s Gowanus neighborhood, that she shares with photographer **Tamara Staples** (the two juggle their schedules when either has larger projects). A six-foot cooler and standard-sized refrigerator make it possible to design during the warmer months.

“We design weddings 12 months of the year. Some growers are beginning to invest in early season ephemerals; things like fritillaria and unique species of ranunculus or lily of the valley. I also source from established commercial greenhouse growers in New Jersey, such as **Van Dyke Farms**, **H.J. Hautau & Sons** and **F.W. Battenfeld & Son**. They are known for tulips, ranunculus and anemones -- three tried-and-true winter flowers,” Culver says. “This helps my events during the off-season months, and I also dip into the California product at that time of year with things like eucalyptus and other foliage.”

Because Culver is committed to sourcing locally and seasonally, she’s spent years developing relationships with growers who now deliver to Brooklyn, especially from June through mid-October when the supply of local flowers “really starts to rev up,” she says.

Culver’s floral style reflects a delicate balance between what she sees in her mind’s eye and the constant awareness of what botanical ingredients are available from local flower farms. She stays in regular contact with the farms to track what they are growing and harvesting, week-by-week.

“I have a strong sense of what the farmers we work with will offer – especially because I’ve kept detailed track of their availability over the years,” she explains. The number



of regional and boutique flower farms supplying Molly Oliver Flowers has continued to increase, especially as they mature and diversify.

Culver marks some of the success of her Slow Flowers' approach to floral design by the increased availability of local flowers. "Many farms have scaled to the point where they're able to devote the labor and the time and money to making deliveries here. Some farms are collaborating on those deliveries, which helps reduce the consumption of fossil fuels," she says.

Culver has certainly achieved her mission of bringing local and seasonal flowers to the urban floral consumer. "As a designer, I need to strike a balance between what my client wants to see and what they're drawn to in my work, with what I want to create. I do my best work when I can ask the client to fully trust me. I tell them, 'I'm going to work with your color palette and our type of aesthetic and it's going to be beautiful because I'll select the best local flowers at this moment in time.'"

DETAILS:

Molly Oliver Flowers, mollyoliverflowers.com,
@ mollyoliverflowers ■



(c) Victoria Morris



(c) Khaki Bedford Photography

A GREENER APPROACH

In the studio and for her events, Molly Culver puts a priority on waste reduction and composting, and avoids all use of synthetic floral foam or other non-biodegradable products and chemicals. As she points out, "It's par for the course in the NYC event world to throw away much of the décor at the end of the night – this waste (vases, flowers, candles, etc.) ends up in a landfill. Unfortunately, many flower studios still rely heavily on floral foam and other synthetic, non-biodegradable products to create designs, and all of this goes into landfills as well."

There are a number of ways Culver works to reduce waste, both in her day-to-day work in the studio and on event days:

- I offer a variety of vessels as rentals, and re-use these as long as possible. This includes recycled glass vessels for candles.
- I make complimentary 'grab and go' bouquets for your guests, and generally ensure you and your guests go home with as many peak quality flowers at the end of your event as desired.
- All unclaimed flower waste is composted locally at urban farms and becomes a nutrient-rich soil amendment.
- All items not accepted by NYC's municipal recycling program are recycled through a partnership with **TerraCycle** (terracycle.com).
- Much of the cardboard and paper packing and packaging from vessel shipments is recycled into delivery packaging for events.
- Molly Oliver Flowers avoids all use of synthetic floral foam or other non-biodegradable products and chemicals and sprays



(c) Weddings by Two Photography



A Moody Tale

An autumn styled photo shoot reflects the place, flowers and palette of the season.

By **Debra Prinzing**

Photos by **Kestrel Bailey**

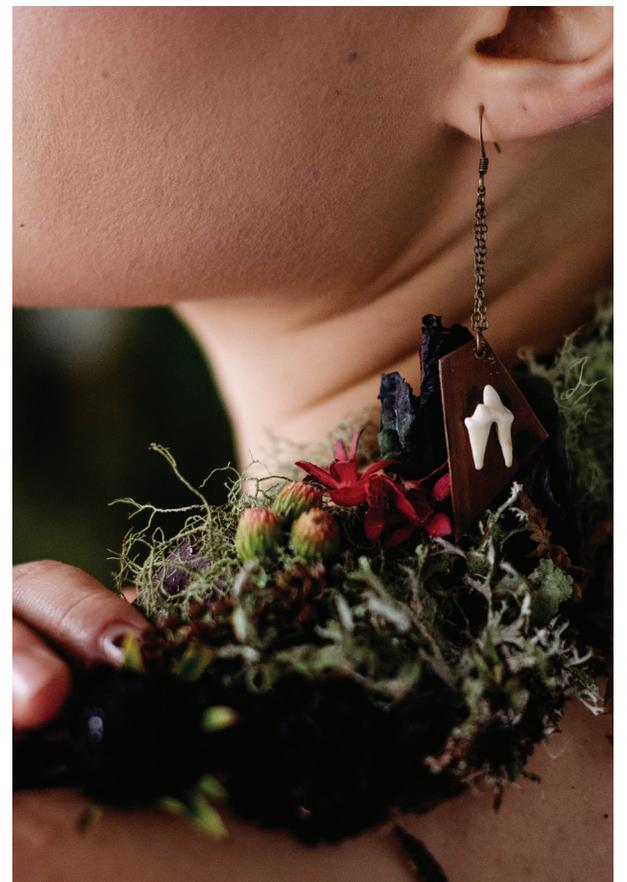
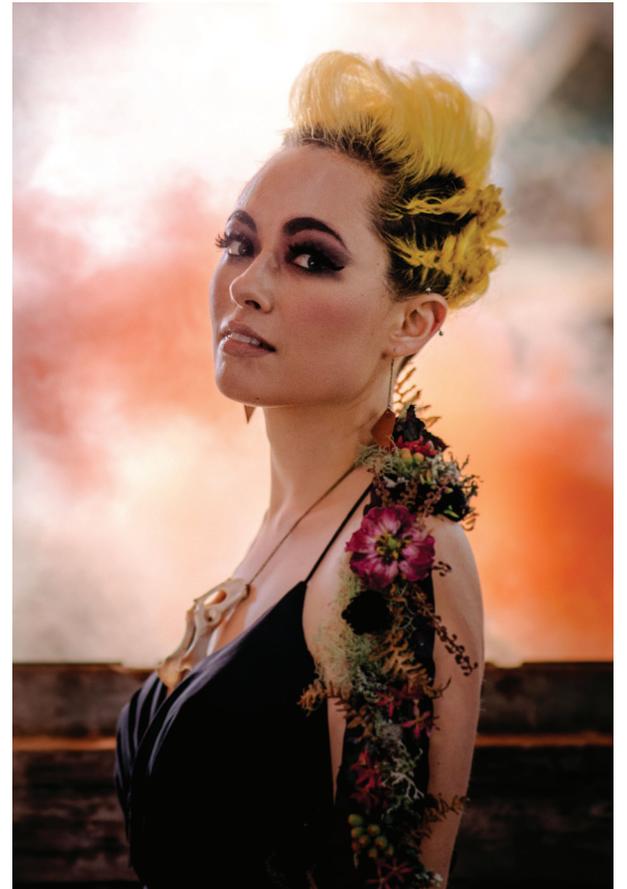
In search of a creative antidote after a long summer of pastel weddings, photographer **Kestrel Bailey** and floral designer **Erin Shackelford** collaborated on a styled photo shoot with a darker plot.

Both are based in the Pacific Northwest's San Juan Islands, where the weather and water are a constant influence, be they grey or sparkling blue, stormy or calm. And since both belong to a small cohort of vendors who serve San Juan Islands' destination weddings, it was natural that flowers by **Camas Designs**, Shackelford's studio based in Friday Harbor, had previously appeared at weddings photographed by Bailey.

Last fall, Bailey reached out to Shackelford and invited her to join "a photo shoot that's a little different," the florist recalls. "She told me it would be a moody project and added, "the model has yellow hair and she's going to be wearing a black wedding dress."

That was enough incentive for Shackelford, along with a small team of fellow creatives, to join the project. "It had been a season of whites and blushes," she recalls. "And I was ready to break the mold and have fun. The first thing I asked Kestrel was, "What do you think of me doing a floral tattoo?" Shackelford confides, "I channeled Passionflower Sue," referring to floral artist Susan Mcleary. "I had taken a workshop with her and had been wanting to try her floral tattoo techniques. I thought it would fit perfectly with the look of the model."

Inspired by model **Kat Lohman's** unconventional style, including frequent hair color changes, the photographer wanted a dramatic visual backdrop for her subject. She selected **Northern State Hospital** in Sedro-Woolley, Wash., a deserted institution with its own edgy, dark vibe. Until the 1970s, the location was known as Northern State Asylum; it was later closed by the state and abandoned for decades. "We didn't want to exploit mental illness or be disrespectful of the history that happened at this site, because it has a dark history," the





photographer observes. “Instead, we wanted to honor the fact that there was strength in the people who experienced life at the hospital and show someone who is strong and empowered.”

Not surprisingly, it was raining on the late autumn day scheduled for the photography. The team members met during the hair and makeup session with stylist **Brenda Tift**. “The color palette chosen by the makeup artist aligned perfectly with what I chose for flower colors and the ribbons I brought for the bouquet,” Shackelford marvels.

She ordered the herbaceous flowers from **Mayesh Wholesale Florist** in Los Angeles, Calif., and combined those fresh ingredients with elements foraged locally on the San Juan Islands. The botanical pieces -- the tattoo and bridal bouquet -- are as dark and pensive as the other design elements. Shackelford selected sultry purple-black tulips and roses with a muted patina, which are intertwined with dried ferns, burgundy and copper-hued orchids, plus lichen, moss, berries and seedpods.

Local artists **Grey Jays** created jewelry pieces specifically for the session, drawing from foraged and found objects, while **Alicia’s Bridal & The Formal House** provided a stunning black wedding dress.

Bailey created a sense of mystery through her lens, not only with her composition and selection of distressed buildings, but

also by infusing the setting with colored smoke bombs. The overall effect has a mysterious, fantasy quality to it, as if a dream.

For her part, Shackelford is hoping that by showcasing her designs in an unusual way it will convince a future bride to wear a floral tattoo.

“Oftentimes, we can get so busy in the wedding season that we don’t carve out the time to feed our own souls,” Shackelford says. “To be able to have the creative time to practice my craft without any expectation of outcome is really important to me. That’s when I remember why I got into floral design, why I enjoy the design process, the flowers and bringing creativity to life.”

DETAILS:

Photography: Kestrel Bailey, @kestrelphoto
Photography and lighting assistant: Evan Quon, @evan.explore
Hair/Makeup: Brenda Tift, @bltift; The Experience Salon @theexperiencesalon
Florals: Erin Shackelford, Camas Designs, @camasdesigns
Jewelry: Grey Jays, @greyjays
Dress: Alicia’s Bridal & The Formal House Tuxedos
Model: Kat Lohman, @katlohman ■

Sublime and Seasonal

Ariella Chezar shares her loving respect for nature as muse, every season of the year.

By **Debra Prinzing**
Photos by **Erin Kunkel**



Author, educator, floral artist Ariella Chezar

Ariella Chezar's bestselling book, entitled *The Flower Workshop* (Ten Speed Press, 2016), reveals her lush, whimsical garden style and her true passion for flowers – both cultivated and wild.

Its popularity created demand for more floral inspiration, and earlier this year the iconic designer treated us to a new volume of ideas. Chezar again teamed with Bay Area photographer **Erin Kunkel** and writing collaborator **Julie Michaels** to publish *Seasonal Floral Arranging* (Ten Speed Press, 2019).

Chezar's medium is ephemeral, and her art expresses both effortless style and deep emotion. She encourages readers to fill their homes with blooms, branches and foraged material all year round. The beautifully photographed book explores Chezar's insights on color theory, sourcing and growing, and foam-free mechanics for 39 seasonal floral designs.

I recently caught up with Ariella Chezar to talk about her new book, and her publisher has graciously shared some of the designer's autumn-themed pieces from its pages.



SFJ: Your color approach is so refreshing. Can you discuss your relationship with color?

AC: I am crazy about color. I love to play with combinations that feel unusual or ones that I haven't seen a dozen times over. Whenever that becomes possible, I get super excited. This is especially true in the fall when there's so much orange and goldenrod. I am curious to find ways that one can play around

with those tones that feel different or fresh. The "Violet and Mustard Thanksgiving Table" felt like that to me, with mustardy roses and lavender mums. I added a peachy poinsettia, which is mind-blowing. It holds surprisingly well as a cut.

SFJ: What draws you to use branches so often?

AC: It's the beauty of foraging. For example, "A Welcome Embrace" is a combination of yellow oak leaves, grapevines and wild

rose hips gathered during a late November walk in the woods. The yellow leaves first drew my eye, but once I discovered the sturdy rose canes draped along an abandoned stone, well, I knew I had the makings of a garland.

SFJ: You didn't put anything into water for this project, did you?

AC: No, and this garland definitely could last for days, out of water. I do feel encouraged that so many



people are now embracing foam-free design; that seems quite basic to me. I know it's easy to get stuck in doing things a certain way, but the alternatives are not that painful or really that difficult.

SFJ: What was your starting point for designing "Autumn Tablescape"?

AC: Definitely chrysanthemums. Next to dahlias, the once-humble chrysanthemum is the autumn flower, familiar to anyone who has ever filled a planter with these supermarket standbys. They are at once seasonal and locally grown. I'm particularly drawn to spider mums, which have tight centers and spiky petals, with colors changing from wine to rust or salmon to pink, on a single flower. I arranged them along a dining table in small pottery vases and accented the flowers with bronze persimmons, purple-red crabapples, black acorns and blue privet berries -- a true

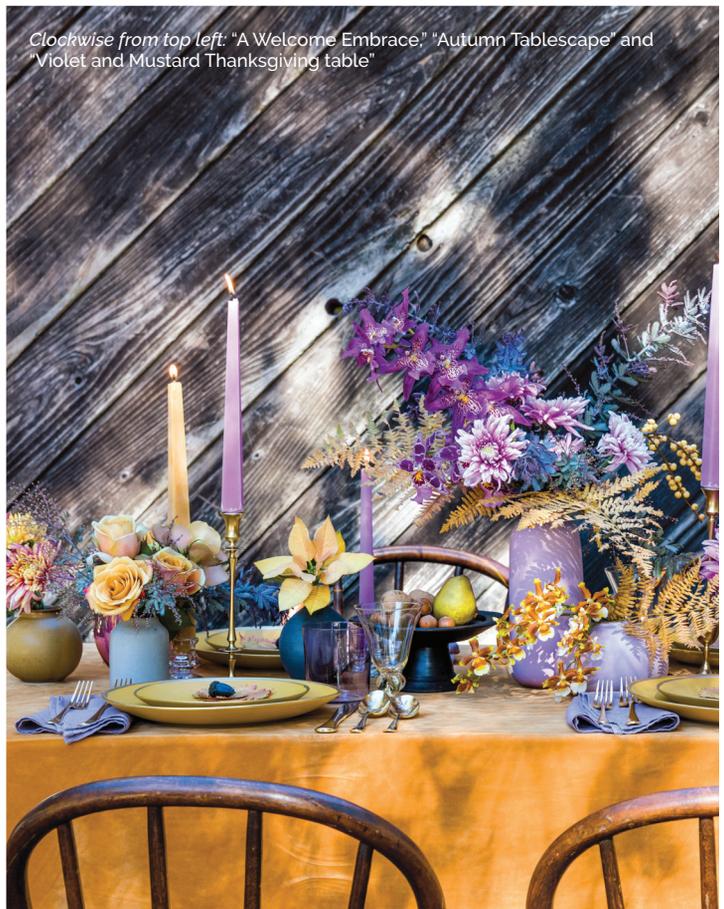
celebration of fall.

SFJ: What have you learned about yourself as your aesthetic evolves?

AC: I recently taught a peony workshop, but I found myself in love with other things besides peonies, like wild roses and ladies bedstraw, wild blackberry canes and raspberry canes. Cultivated flowers are becoming less and less seductive to me. And these wilder, simpler, really natural shapes and elements are gaining my favor. Not that garden roses aren't beautiful, because they are, but we've had a visual assault of beauty and excess. I know I'm as much to blame as anyone else, but I think there's part of me seeking a different feeling from nature.

Details:

Ariella Chezar, ariellaflowers.com,
 @ariellachezardesign
 Seasonal Flower Arranging
 (Ten Speed Press, 2019) ■



Clockwise from top left: "A Welcome Embrace," "Autumn Tablescape" and "Violet and Mustard Thanksgiving table"