

Susan McLeary shares her iconic approach to designing floral wearables in her new book

Full disclosure, Sue McLeary invited me to write the foreword to her new book, so this is a thoroughly biased article. When you see the beautiful images of McLeary's creativity, as captured through the lens of her frequent collaborator Amanda Dumouchelle, I know you will agree with me that *The Art of Wearable Flowers* (Chronicle Books, March 2020) elevates floral accessories and jewelry to an entirely new category of botanical couture.

Floral for the Body

Florists' Review first profiled McLeary in March 2017 for the "Creativity" issue, and I titled my article "A Curious Creative." Indeed, McLeary's inquisitiveness has fueled her to push the medium of floral art to new echelons as she seeks inventive ways to produce the ideas in her mind's eye.

The Art of Wearable Flowers is filled with lots of instruction, including how-tos for 40 floral accessories that range from an eye-catching succulent baubles and hyacinth hoops to a showstopping petal necklace and luxurious all-white headpiece. Bracelets, corsages, fascinators and a petal bustier round out the many alluring projects, each designed with fine details and signature styling known to McLeary's nearly 100,000 Instagram followers, workshop students and subscribers to her new online courses. Each design project includes an ingredients list, styling tips, and easy-to-follow instructions paired with step-by-step photographs.

I recently spoke with McLeary to ask her to reflect on this book and how it has changed her as a design professional. McLeary is an award-winning floral designer known for her unique, boundary-pushing floral art. Her work has been featured by *Florists' Review*, *Martha Stewart Weddings*, *The Knot*, *Refinery29*, *SELF*, *Country Living*, *BuzzFeed*, and *Modern Wedding Flowers*. She lives in Ann Arbor, Mich.

This design: Demi-Crown



SFJ: How do you describe *The Art of Wearable Flowers*?

SM: It's a little love letter. It's my take on why the ephemeral medium of flowers is so important. Creating floral wearables is my way to pique the public's interest; grab the viewer's attention. It's fleeting. It's unexpected. This book highlights the value I see in the medium of flowers. You're forced to stop and appreciate these designs because they are so fleeting.

SFJ: Did writing this book and creating the projects for it change your own definition of floral wearables?

SM: Yes. The book allowed me more quiet time to think about why I do the things I do. Having to pause and think about my process and what I want to communicate has been really helpful in my teaching, too.

SFJ: What do you hope the reader response will be?

SM: It's not really about making something usable or realistic or functional even. For me, it's about pushing the art of floristry forward a little bit, opening the public's eyes to what florists are capable of and generating more interest in and respect for the craft.

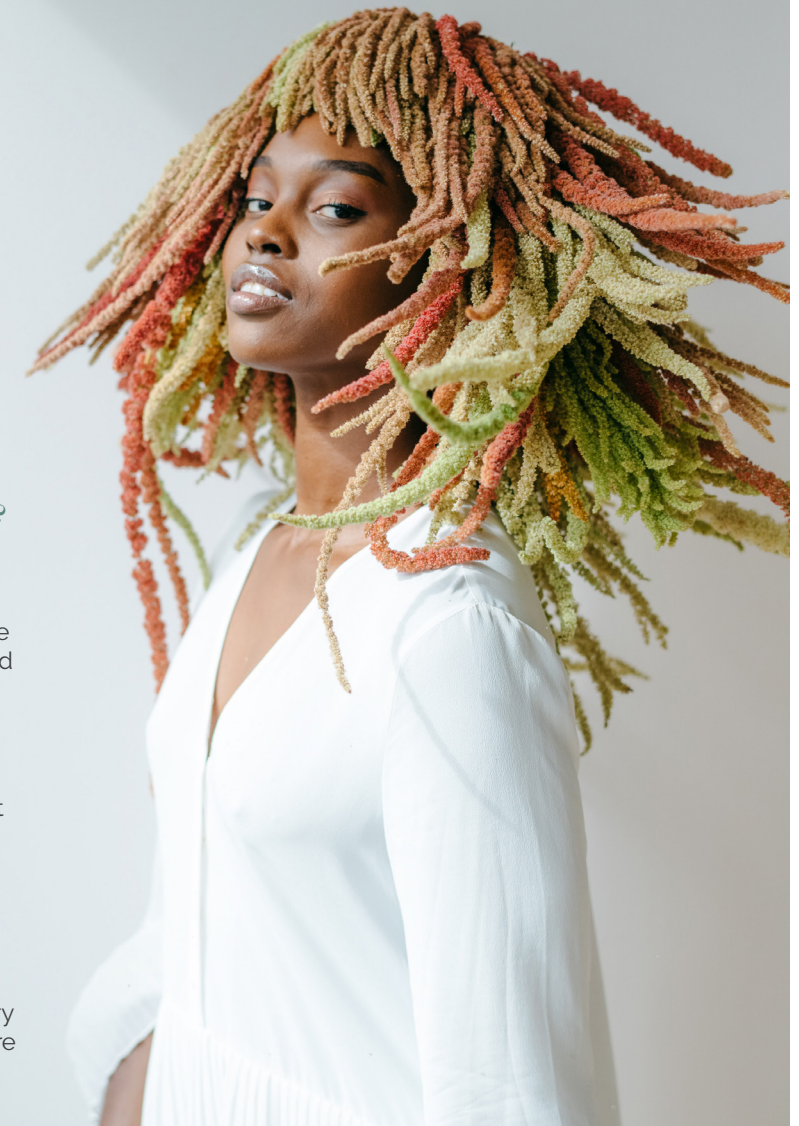
SFJ: How did you come up with your list of 40 projects?

SM: Some of these are old favorites. But once I was given permission to daydream about what I would fill the book with, new ideas just started to pop into my head. There are some main-course kind of projects and there are some little side dishes that are really simple. I actually like some of the simpler projects more than the complex ones because I think readers will want to try those first.

SFJ: I love your references to sources of inspiration for a specific design.

SM: My editors asked me to write head notes for each project, so I had to think about where my inspiration came from. It was a fun exercise. I think it's really easy to just pull ideas from other sources and forget the origin. I actually enjoyed remembering and noting why I first thought of an idea. It was never my original idea, but something inspired by someone else.

Amaranthus Extensions



SFJ: The Introduction is your personal story and I love that you titled it: "My Floral Journey." What did you want to convey?

SM: One of the topics I wrote about is addressing fear in the creative process, which I think might be a different than other books.

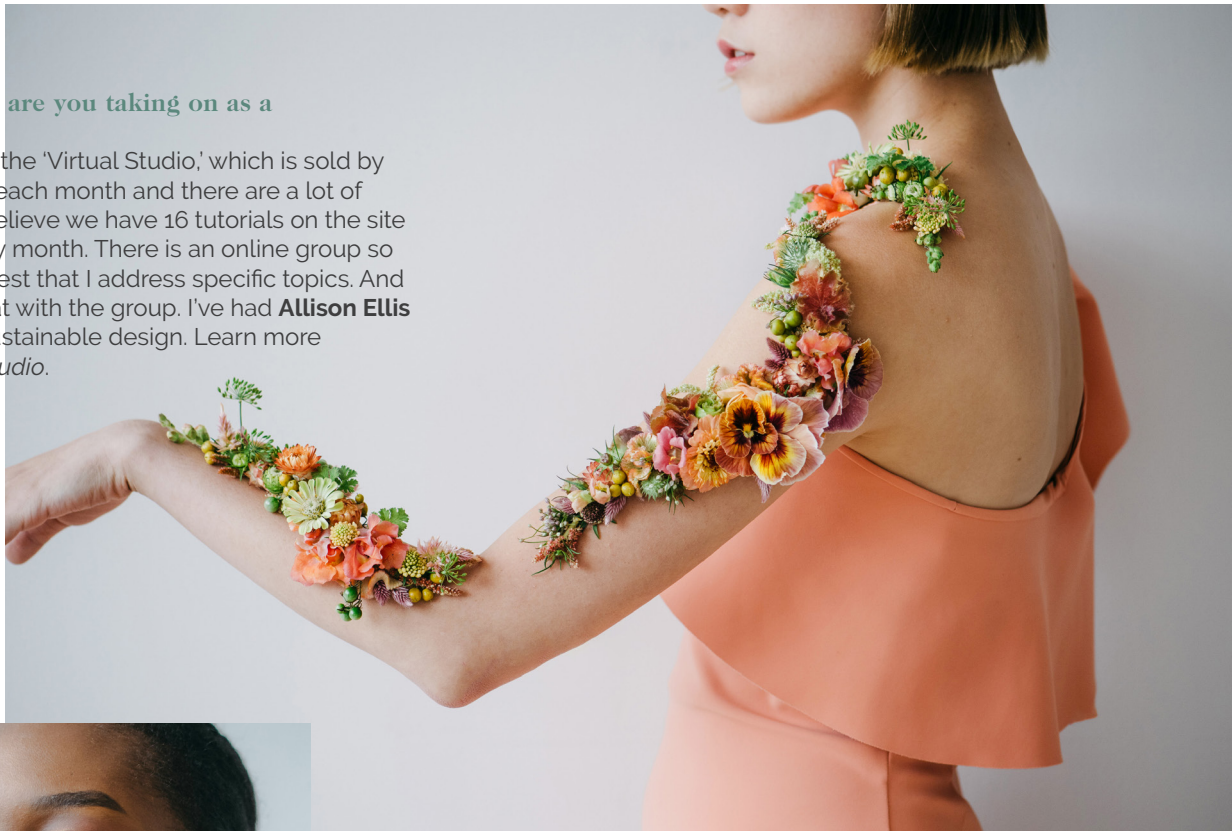
SFJ: I love your carnation bustier. It is so remarkable and when I look at Amanda Dumouchelle's photography of that piece, I find myself thinking how cool it would be if some fashionista would commission it for a gala. Do you see this ever happening?

SM: It would be a dream come true to design wearable flowers for the Met Gala, like a floral shrug or an over-the-top floral tattoo. I'm hoping the book pushes open doors to opportunities like that.

SFJ: What kind of new projects are you taking on as a floral designer?

SM: I've launched what I'm calling the 'Virtual Studio,' which is sold by subscription. It's a small payment each month and there are a lot of wearable floral topics covered. I believe we have 16 tutorials on the site now, with a new class added every month. There is an online group so people who are part of it can request that I address specific topics. And I'm also bringing on experts to chat with the group. I've had **Allison Ellis** and **Tobey Nelson** spoke about sustainable design. Learn more at passionflowersue.com/virtual-studio.

Clockwise from top left:
"S" shape Tattoo Corsage;
Floral Bustier and Shoulder Tattoo



Floral Bangle

(from The Art of Wearable Flowers by Susan McLeary with photography by Amanda Dumouchelle)

MATERIALS:

- 2 or 3 stems white spray chrysanthemum (mum)
- 1 stem green antique hydrangea
- 2 or 3 stems Japanese spray rose 'Eclair'
- Stem wrap tape
- 2 or 3 stems white agapanthus
- 1 stem blooming feather acacia
- 1 calocephalus plant (herbs, bleached fern, or feather acacia would also work well)
- One bangle bracelet (the snipped inner ring from a spent stem wrap tape roll also works well)
- Oasis 28-gauge bullion wire, gold
- 1 stem white hyacinth
- Oasis floral adhesive

My dear friend Holly Chapple, florist extraordinaire, opened my eyes to this design years ago. We were hanging out at her floral conference, sitting at a table full of floral detritus—abandoned florets, stray greenery and herbs, and spent stem wrap tape rolls. She showed me how to make a bangle using the tape roll by quickly whipping up the sweetest little floral bracelet using the ingredients on the table. This design is essentially a miniature wreath, made by laying little floral bundles onto the base (in Holly's case, a spent tape roll that she had snipped open) one by one, each bundle covering the stems of the last, until the circle is complete. This a fun-to-make, fun-to-wear, unexpected, playful alternative to the standard corsage.

Note: Some of the materials have soft stems, so it's essential to tape them together first—this ensures that the wire used to bind them to the bracelet base won't cut into their stems, causing breakage.



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Step 1: Prepare all your bundles before assembling. Cut the mums, hydrangea florets, Japanese spray roses, and agapanthus florets to a stem length of 1 to 2 in (2.5 to 5 cm). Bundle the mums, hydrangea, and roses in 2 or 3 stem bunches and bind them together with the stem wrap tape. Gather the dainty agapanthus florets in 8 to 10 stem bunches and bind with tape. Trim the sturdy acacia and calocephalus stems to your desired length; no need to tape these.



Step 2: Choose a place on the bangle and firmly wrap it with a little piece of the stem wrap tape; this is where you'll start attaching florets. Roll out and cut a length of the bullion wire, about 12 in (30.5 cm) long; for this piece, it's much easier to work with when it's not attached to the roll. Begin by attaching the wire to the taped spot on the bangle: press one end of the wire to the taped area, and wrap the wire over itself to secure it to the taped portion of the bangle.

Step 3: Start adding materials: Press a floral bundle against the bracelet, pull the wire taut, and wrap it around the taped portion of the bundle a few times. Continue to add bundles, alternating varieties and the direction the blooms are facing, working your way around the base. With each addition, pull the wire downward, keeping it taut, and wrap it around the taped portion of the bundle a few times to secure it to the bangle base.

Step 4: Once you have added all the bundles, trim and secure any remaining wire to the bangle base. Now comes the fun part—add delicate hyacinth florets to the piece using floral adhesive. Cut the blooms from their stems, dip them in the floral glue, and find secure spaces within the tight network of wired stems you just created to tuck them into. Cluster some of these delicate flowers together for interest and impact.

Step 5: Add little bits of the calocephalus plant, acacia, or agapanthus buds to the piece to complete it and add movement.



Step 6: To prevent flattening on one side, take care to store this piece in a box lined with plenty of loose shredded paper. ■