

ECO-FRIENDLY FLOWERS TO ARRANGE YOURSELF

While sharing her know-how with flower lovers on both coasts, a young entrepreneur is changing the conventional role of the floral designer

Bess Wyrick, founder of Celadon & Celery Events, a New York-based eco-couture event design and floral decor company, thinks it's smart business to teach budget-conscious hostesses and brides how to create their own bouquets and centerpieces. The studio's popular workshops include demonstrations and hands-on participation "about the trends and techniques of the floral industry - while also having an eye on the environment," explains Bess, the company's twenty-something creative director, who exudes ambition and confidence.



It's important to Bess and her instructors that they share not just floral techniques but also insider florists' resources with their students. By doing so, they know that potential event clients will notice and appreciate their earth-friendly, chic aesthetic.

"We probably annoy a lot of people in our industry by teaching how to do these tricks of the trade, but we're in the middle of a recession and many people can't afford to do the type of weddings or events they used to," says Bess. A New Mexico native, she launched Celadon & Celery in 2009 after designing bridal gowns in San Francisco and working for one of New York's top floral studios.

Bess endorses an environmentally-savvy design approach that appeals to brides and special event clients alike, including the Kardashians, Vera Wang and Mayor Bloomberg, for whom she has provided flowers.

Getting started

The studio's two-hour sustainable-design workshops typically go for \$300. When Celadon & Celery expanded west to Los Angeles in 2011, Bess dropped the tuition to \$125 for the first series of classes and used public relations and social media channels to promote them.

Overwhelmed by the positive response, she rented a photography studio in downtown Los Angeles and turned it into a classroom inspired by her loft-studio in New York's Chelsea Flower District. Bess hired a few local freelancers to help and ran three classes a day for three weeks. "In that time we taught floral design to 800 people," she marvels.

Hoping to experience the classes first-hand, we dropped by one Friday night. Photos of Celadon & Celery's eye-popping bouquets enlivened the otherwise stark white walls; upbeat dance music played on the speakers. Our own private flower market occupied the left side of the room, with all sorts of buckets containing a wow-worthy selection of fresh flowers and foliage. As students checked in, they snacked on hors d'oeuvres and sipped hot tea, eventually finding a spot along one of the waist-high worktables. Each station held a round glass vase, floral snips, bind-wire and a thorn-stripping tool. I found my own spot to join the class while David captured the energy of the room through his lens.

Where did these people come from? We met a fund-raiser for a local nonprofit and a film actress, among other (mostly female) students. Bess has her own theory about those who attend, often in pairs or trios with friends. "I think people are looking for an *experience* versus just going to a bar for a drink," she speculates. While she brushes her bangs out of her face, a delicate tattoo on the inside of her right wrist is revealed. It reads: *earth laughs in flowers*. It is a personal motto, surely, since laughing a lot is what Bess is good at.



Above: Bess Wyrick, founder and creative director of Celadon & Celery, is a young, enterprising designer who shares her knowledge with thousands of DIY students each year.

Opposite: With focused attention to the nuances of rose preparation, floral-design enthusiasts soak up Celadon & Celery's how-to tips. Many say that the hands-on workshop gives them new found knowledge and confidence to design their own arrangements.



Above: Robinne Lee, an actress, was so pleased with her bouquet that she photographed it with her smart phone to share with friends on Twitter.

With work aprons tied around our waists and everyone's vase filled with water, we eagerly grabbed clippers and eyed the fresh ingredients. Bess introduced each of the blooms and leaves, explaining its origin and variety as assistants distributed our "ingredients":

4 lime-green locally grown hydrangeas

5 bi-colored pink and cream certified organic 'Esperance' roses (grown in South America)

2 gray-green sprays of Dusty Miller foliage

3 California-grown dahlias

6 burgundy ti leaves from Hawaii

10 variegated blades of lily grass, also from Hawaii.

Even though each of us used the same design "recipe" and set of flowers, no one felt deprived of creativity, since there was plenty of wiggle room to experiment as we worked.

"Think about filling a vase of flowers like you're building a puzzle," Bess explained as she began to demonstrate with a contemporary glass cylinder. "You start with the border and then fill in toward the center," she said, swiftly filling her vase as she demonstrated how to "line" it with two of the burgundy-and-green ti leaves so that their streaks of color disguise the other stems inside. Rather than poking stems into the florists' foam she hates to use, the

designer showed us how to create an interior grid with each flower stem crossing the next. First, we arranged the hydrangeas; then, we inserted the gorgeous roses among them, trying out a designer's trick by threading a rose stem through the center of the fluffy hydrangea – like topping whipped cream with a cherry. By folding over the long ti leaves and securing their tips to their stems with some wire, the burgundy foliage soon resembled loops of ribbon on a gift box. There were plenty of gaps to integrate silvery Dusty Miller leaves and magenta dahlias, each addition upping the glamour of the vase. Several slender blades of the otherwise ordinary lily grass, looped and tied like the ti leaves, created the sparkling finale.

Pretty soon, each of us gazed proudly at our floral masterpiece, sharing smiles and words of encouragement. It was no surprise to witness more than one adult snap a photo of her finished bouquet to post on Facebook or Twitter. I loved how polished and chic my arrangement looked. "At the end of the class, no one wants to leave," Bess jokes.

I asked Sash Ramaswami and Robinne Lee, who came together with another friend, what prompted them to sign up. Sash learned about the workshop through social.com, a daily deal site, she said. "I have always wanted to have great-looking flower arrangements, but I never knew what to do. No matter how pretty my flowers were, they looked awful in a vase." For each, the short class helped nurture their inner floral designer. Sash sent me an email message a few weeks after the workshop, writing: "A friend came over and asked me if it was my birthday. She saw the arrangement I had made and said it looked so professional that she thought someone had sent me flowers. Mission accomplished!"

Similarly, Robinne savored the hands-on class, describing it as "the perfect girls' night out." While she had never tried arranging flowers before, Robinne always admired the skill in others. "I think I can do this for myself or friends now," she said.

Designer secrets

For its New York design commissions, Celadon & Celery buys from Long Island, Connecticut and New Jersey growers. The studio composts all greenery and delivers arrangements by bicycle or on foot.

Celadon & Celery's direct relationship with farms gives the studio its leading edge, Bess feels. "We're helping establish the market by predicting what brides are going to want. We can be confident placing an order for 5,000 dahlias because we know who is growing them. We've definitely bypassed the Manhattan middlemen and have gone straight to the farmers."

In Los Angeles, thanks to an abundant supply of California-grown local blooms and some imported ingredients bearing the Veriflora label (indicating sustainable growing practices), Bess filled the L.A. pop-up studio with a fresh explosion of botanical variety. It was easy, since the Los Angeles Flower District, one of the largest wholesale flower markets in the country, was located just blocks away.

By giving students an original experience with a nod to the environment, Celadon & Celery has tapped into a visceral desire to connect with nature, take creative risks and try something they may have never done before – arrange flowers with intent rather than just tearing off the cellophane wrapping and shoving a bunch of stems into a vase.

"The word 'eco' has a bad reputation, implying something weedy," Bess says. "But we're creating flowers that are sophisticated, chic and tailored. We often tell our students to have fun with their arrangements, to be imaginative and to get in touch with their inner child."



Above, from top: Bess demonstrates a trick with roses: She sometimes folds back the outer petals of a long-stemmed rose to make the flower head appear fuller; according to Bess, male students like Miles Clark are not a rarity. "Guys enjoy learning how to design flowers as much as women do," she says.



Tips from Celadon & Celery

Bess wants students to use a sustainable approach and learn the skills to make their own wedding or event flowers. Here are some of the studio's tricks and techniques:

- Divide floral ingredients into three categories based on form: Doming flowers, such as hydrangeas, dahlias, roses and other large, full blooms; Line flowers, such as calla lilies and tulips; and Filler, such as baby's breath, goldenrod, daisies or soft foliage.
- Calculate the number of stems your vase will hold by multiplying the vase diameter by 10. For example, a 6-inch-wide vase opening will hold up to 60 stems.
- Start with a thoroughly clean vase. "Your flowers will last 30% longer," she says.
- Use a variety of "green" arranging materials inside your vase. Old-fashion flower frogs, pincushion-style frogs used by Ikebana designers or loosely-formed chicken wire are each an excellent alternative to green florists' foam, which Celadon & Celery's staff calls "cancer-on-a-stick" because it has so many toxic ingredients.
- Stems can also be stabilized by taping a grid over the vase opening or making a natural one by angling flower stems to support each other.
- Set water temperature depending on the type of ingredients: Branches and woody material prefer warmer water; flower stems prefer cooler water.



- Re-hydrate some wilting blooms, including hydrangeas. Dunk their heads in tepid water for 5 to 10 minutes to refresh them. If your flower has a hollow stem, like a calla lily or amaryllis, submerge the entire stem to fill it with water. Plug the opening with a piece of cotton ball. The designer uses this trick for gala events when she hangs flowers upside-down from the ceiling.
- Determine whether a rose is right for your arrangement. The technique is a lot like squeezing fruit in the produce department to see if it's ripe. "Gently press the head of your rose," Bess suggests. "If it has the consistency of an orange, with a little give to it, then it's perfect."
- Wrap, secure or tie stems in place with bind-wire, one of her favorite tricks. The thin wire has a waxy coating and comes in a dark green or natural brown finish.

Above: Bess kneels in front of a class photo (that's Debra on the far right). Everyone left with two arrangements and the self-assurance to use professional techniques in the future.

Opposite: Our bouquets were based on a joy-inducing palette of greens and pinks. The ingredients included California-grown hydrangeas, dahlias and Dusty Miller; foliage from Hawaii; and certified organic roses from South America.