



SUBLIME AND SENSUOUS

By design, a Sunday brunch that's a feast for the eyes

Designer **Melissa Feveyear** appreciates the traditional definition of a florist: "It used to be a person who grew and sold their own flowers," she explains. By choosing and gathering botanical ingredients inspired by that old-fashioned notion, the Seattle florist considers flowers from a grower's point of view, asking "Where was it grown?" "How was it cultivated?" and "When does it reach peak beauty in the vase?"

Yet, instead of owning rural acreage planted with romantic rows of annuals and perennials, Melissa is firmly planted on city soil at Terra Bella Organic Floral & Botanical Designs, a 1,000-square-foot flower shop in Seattle's Greenwood neighborhood. Curiosity and intentionality are two of her design tools; she selects foliage, blooms, and other fresh-from-the-field elements with the same care as if she personally grew each ephemeral blossom or stem in her own backyard. That connection with nature is vitally important to her artistic philosophy.

"If flowers aren't locally or organically grown, then they are most likely coming from some huge factory farm," she says. "My customers do not want flowers dipped in strong pesticides on their dinner table."

Most of the flowers in Terra Bella's designs are sustainably grown or Veriflora Certified. A segment of commercially-grown flowers bears this designation, but Melissa isn't wedded to labeling. Instead, she hungers for uncommon blooms – the type of flower not likely to show up at the wholesale market. She's become a flower sleuth, tapping into unique, hard-to-find botanical sources. This means raiding her private garden and the backyards of family and friends, developing relationships with local, organic flower farms, and looking for specialty growers whose crops aren't durable enough to ship long distances.

With a sweetheart face framed by cascading red tendrils, Melissa's appearance is as old-fashioned and dreamy as the blooms she designs. Similarly, her floral inspiration comes from the past and the present-day.

When we asked Melissa to design flowers for an elegant Sunday brunch – in the dead of winter – she responded with amazing creativity and fashioned one arrangement for the



Above: Melissa Feveyear, owner of Terra Bella Organic Floral & Botanical Designs in Seattle, sources her ingredients from local flower farmers and foragers like Tosh Rosford.

Opposite: Evoking the flowers immortalized on the canvases of Old-World painters, Melissa created a rich, botanical palette of blooms, foliage, fruit and branches. The bouquet's ingredients come from local, sustainable farms and private gardens.



buffet table and a corresponding spray of blooms for the fireplace mantel. The setting's chocolate-burgundy-cream-and-teal color scheme, vintage furnishings and heirloom china and serving pieces presented a romantic backdrop for Melissa's floral palette. "I picked out a selection of apricot, cool orange, and ruby-red flowers that together make a beautiful, juicy bouquet," Melissa explains. "I opted for this combination, simply because these are the colors that inspire me."

She selected a vintage 36-inch glass vase for the main event. Fluted at the rim and base, its sensuous lines were well-suited for the unstructured but sophisticated presentation Melissa had in mind. Gracing the mantel, a verdigris cachepot contained a similarly copious arrangement using many of the same flowers and greenery.

This event took place in January, when many floral designers find it hard to locate seasonal and locally-grown ingredients. Yet Melissa had a surprisingly bountiful selection from which to choose. Garden-fresh foliage provided the foundation for her design, including shiny acanthus leaves from Jello Mold Farms. Other greenery included boughs of heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), glossy-leaved camellia branches and dagger ferns – all clipped from private gardens.

Melissa's evocative designs could easily be mistaken for still-life arrangements associated with the Dutch masters of the early 17th century. Luscious and ruffled, saffron-and-crimson parrot tulips were central to her vision. Amethyst-colored hyacinths promised springtime with their intoxicating scent. Apricot, coral and plum-red roses – including those grown sustainably in Oregon and Ecuador – infused the bouquet with romance, while bud-laden branches of coral quince and white-flowering forsythia lent texture and seasonal interest. And, just like the Dutch painters, Melissa invited the orchard's bounty into her arrangement with sliced pomegranates and fuzzy apricots.

The completed designs conjured an Old-World narrative in which each flower conveyed a symbolic message to anyone who witnessed its beauty.



Above, from top: Even during January in Seattle, a floral designer like Melissa can realize her creative vision thanks to a rainbow of sustainable tulips, grown by Alm Hill Gardens in Everson, Washington; Tosh supplies Melissa and other designers with wild-harvested and cultivated floral elements, including Japanese fantail willow (*Salix udensis* 'Sekka'), with an unusual, contorted form.

The Organic Question

For the Sunday brunch bouquet, Melissa originally envisioned using voluptuous garden roses. She asked a sustainable farmer from Oregon to deliver flowers in her desired peachy-apricot palette. (In the Northwest, even during chilly winters, a few growers raise flowers in protected greenhouses to satisfy year-round demand.)

"When the roses arrived, though, they didn't have the look and feel I had hoped for, nor were they quite the right color," she says. This unexpected, day-of-the-party-mishap is something designers face all the time, but it creates a special challenge for florists committed to using only seasonal and locally-sourced ingredients. As a result, Melissa supplemented the original rose palette with 'Milva', a pretty soft apricot rose imported from a sustainable farm in Ecuador. "I had to change my vision for the design to use different flowers that were available but also in keeping with my values," she explains.

Fortunately, the dark plum-red spray roses and spicy orange hybrid tea roses from Peterkort Roses, the Oregon grower, were gorgeous, lending a nice contrast to the design's softer botanical elements.

Like *locavores* who want their food to originate within a 100-mile radius, eco-savvy floral designers have their own definition of "local" when sourcing botanical material. Melissa's challenge is to balance her desire for organically-grown blooms with the environmental impact of ordering cut flowers from



domestic and international growers beyond her corner of the U.S. These artistic and ethical decisions are reflected in each one of her beautiful bouquets.

Above: Designing with sustainably-grown flowers is important to Melissa, who is concerned about exposure to pesticides used in conventional flower crops.

In fact, Terra Bella influences the entire chain of people with whom it comes into contact, since Melissa seeks out and supports farmers with a compatible philosophy about flower-growing. She strives to encourage and educate her customers about the many benefits of requesting "green" flowers. "My customers do care about supporting the community and local farmers. But they don't always think about how organic flowers will affect them personally. That is, until they learn how many pesticides are in conventionally-grown cut flowers. That awareness is only just starting."



Eco-Tip

“Oasis,” is a Styrofoam-like product made from petrochemicals. While florists have for years used the generic green blocks of foam to stabilize stems in low or wide-mouthed vases, Melissa doesn’t want to expose herself, her clients, or the environment to the material. Research for a healthier, organic substitute led her to wood aspen. Also known as excelsior, the material is comprised of fine wood fibers. It is often used as packaging material for wine bottles and other breakables. “It isn’t treated with chemicals like florist foam and it doesn’t degrade quickly in water,” Melissa says. Stems and branches can be inserted into the tangle of natural-colored wood aspen inside a vase. Excelsior is available at craft shops and from online sources that sell packaging material.

Design Technique

Melissa creates romantic, sophisticated bouquets by designing with a light hand. She highlights the natural form and shape of each flower, stem and branch by letting them fall gently into place (rather than manipulating or contorting them). One of her favorite techniques is to group similar blooms together as they would appear in the garden. “I like to cluster flowers,” she says. These pleasing groupings give Melissa’s bouquets added interest and make her designs feel “just picked.”

Floral Ingredients

Seasonal and sustainably-grown
Parrot tulips and hyacinths,
Alm Hill Gardens, Bellingham, WA

Acanthus leaves, flowering quince
branches and white forsythia
(*Abeliophyllum distichum*),
Jello Mold Farm, Mt. Vernon, WA

Heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*),
Jean Zaputil’s garden, Seattle

Western sword fern
(*Polystichum munitum*),
Jean Fiala’s garden, Fall City, WA

Camellia branches,
Melissa Feveyear’s garden, Seattle

Wild-foraged ingredients
Pieris japonica, from “Tosh,” a Seattle hunter-gatherer who gleans natural ingredients and sells them to floral designers

Locally-grown ingredients
Spray roses, garden roses and maiden fern,
Peterkort Roses, Oregon

Eco-Certified flowers
‘Milva’ roses, Ecuador



Above: Tosh’s offerings come straight from the woods, meadows or fields. Floral designers rely on this hunter-gatherer for the types of branches and stems (including this colorful twig dogwood) that give their arrangements a naturalistic look.

Left: Melissa relies on relationships with local flower farmers who specialize in unique, sustainably-grown crops. She frequently shops for flowers at Seattle’s Pike Place Market, where Alm Hill Gardens sells field-grown tulips almost every month of the year. Here, Alm Hill’s Mejken Poore wraps tulips for sale to customers.

Opposite: A sublime spectrum of coral, apricot and red roses inspired the Sunday brunch bouquet. Jean Zaputil, a Seattle artist, garden and interior designer, styled the floral portrait, including the lavish tabletop spread photographed at Terra Bella.