



Back to Her Roots



Wedding florist Sophie Felts grew up on a tree farm in Montgomery County, where as a child she helped out in her father's nursery. Years later she moved home and started a business of her own.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN | PHOTOS BY GASTON LACOMBE



ON A THURSDAY AFTERNOON in September, wedding florist Sophie Felts is searching for something. Standing in the middle of her floral studio in an old converted barn, she scans dozens of tall plastic pails on the floor that are filled with branches and sherbet-colored flowers.

“We need whites,” she says to no one in particular. “Where are the whites?”

She stares at the dahlias. “Are these too orangey?” she mutters before moving toward the walk-in flower refrigerator. The studio, on a quiet two-lane road in Laytonsville, just a stone’s throw from where she grew up, is painted white, with a contemporary table and four pastel-pink folding chairs set up near a garage

door in the front. *House & Garden* magazines from the 1970s are stacked in the bathroom, and a spool of hand-dyed silk ribbon hangs near a wood-burning stove. Twenty clipboards adorn the wall, perfectly aligned, each with an upcoming wedding date and a collage of flower photos.

Felts, her hair in a messy bun, walks out of the refrigerator. “Oh good, there’s more white in the cooler,” she says, also remembering the delivery of white cosmos scheduled for that afternoon.

At the moment, Felts, the founder of Blossom + Vine, is preparing for a three-wedding weekend: one in Annapolis, another in Purcellville, Virginia, and a

third in St. Michaels at the Inn at Perry Cabin, where *Wedding Crashers* was filmed. Gone are the days when she ran the business on her own and often found herself crying at 2 a.m. over the amount of work she had to do. Still, the weight of making a bride’s dream day come true, at least in the floral department, rests on her shoulders.

“It always hits me when all the flowers are here,” she says. “A panic about not being able to do it.”

Felts, who has four young children, has to leave home before 5 a.m. tomorrow to deliver one couple’s flowers to a wedding planner. Later in the weekend she’ll be hanging giant eucalyptus wreaths on



barn doors and handling flower arrangements in giant urns, which she's afraid will blow over. One of the brides, whom Felts describes as "a country girl," wants her bouquet nestled around pheasant feathers and antlers. Yes, antlers.

THERE'S A FLORAL REVOLUTION

underway, producing stunning, wild and flawed arrangements that may include dead sticks, miniature strawberries or even animal horns. A *New York Times* "Vows" column earlier this year reported that a wedding florist "foraged the greenery for the gorgeous flower arrangements from trees in a nearby parking lot." Today's brides pay good money for



Felts emerges from the flower refrigerator at a Laytonsville nursery with a bucket of dinner-plate dahlias. Opposite: Felts, right, works on wedding centerpieces with colleagues Erica Conner (far left) and Ali Chakola.

imperfection—whether it’s browning weeds or leaves nibbled by worms—and for the creativity behind it. Goodbye, rigidly positioned, perfectly proportioned arrangements. Hello, whimsy.

Felts, 35, is at the forefront of this movement. Inspired by the work of celebrity florist Erin Benzakein, Felts started her business in 2013 and now averages 30 to 35 weddings a year. She teams up with local growers who adjust their planting based on her needs, not unlike chefs who partner with organic farms that will accommodate a restaurant’s menu. In March, she and her Blossom + Vine team hosted a nine-day, \$3,000 per person training workshop for freelance floral designers.

Tan and slender with bright blue eyes, Felts has a youthful, folksy and sometimes self-deprecating way, quick to deflect praise. Even in her design work, she can seem uncertain, doubting the placement of new stems. Other times, her delight over a new floral combination, wildflowers on the side of the road, or seedlings sprouting from the ground can make her gasp, giddy with joy.

At the studio, named “Daphne Hill” after her youngest child, Felts breathes a sigh of relief over the white flowers. For the moment, everything is on track. She’s already picked up her order from PlantMasters, a nearby flower shop—the wreaths, four bunches of lavender and white cosmos, 50 tuberoses and 15 bunches of peach and coral Lilliput zinnias—and the strong smell of eucalyptus has overtaken the studio. Felts hops into a small utility vehicle and drives onto the adjacent 600-acre tree farm where she spent much of her childhood—her father, Craig Ruppert, founded Ruppert Nurseries there. When trees grow too close together, the nursery staff marks individual trunks with ribbon to indicate where Felts can cut branches for her brides. With a long pruner, she trims from ginkgo and dynasty elm trees, and clips some goldenrod and aster from a field.

Throughout the day, the barn bustles with visitors. Felts’ sister, Charlotte





Clockwise from opposite page, top: Felts' daughters June (left) and Cordelia join her as she drives around Ruppert Nurseries pruning branches and leaves; Cordelia, 7, snacks on a sunflower; Felts and colleague Erica Conner stop on the side of the road to harvest wild greenery for floral arrangements; Felts and Ali Chakola inspect the contents of the vehicle after a foraging trip; the nursery staff marks tree trunks with ribbon to indicate where Felts can cut branches for her brides.

Erica Conner gathers flowers at one of Blossom + Vine's local suppliers, Red Wiggler Community Farm in Germantown. Below: Felts with Leon Carrier at PlantMasters in Laytonsville.



McGehee, Blossom + Vine's production manager, arrives at lunchtime with her baby. Then the au pair shows up with three of Felts' children (7-year-old Cordelia is in school). Four-year-old twins June (hanging onto her mother's neck) and Kael (jealous that June's being held) want to stay with Felts while she works, as they often do. Felts says she struggles with the idea of having full-time help for her children, but she considers her au pair part of the team that makes the business possible. "I feel constantly guilty and wonder if I'm doing it right," she says. "But I feel like we've hit a really sweet spot. I feel like we found a formula that, at least for this second, is working"

Felts calls Woody Woodroof, the founder of Red Wiggler Community Farm in Germantown, where she'll go

later today to cut end-of-season cosmos and strawflowers, to tell him that she's running late. Then Jessica Todd from Cut Flowers by Clear Ridge, a flower grower in Carroll County, stops by to drop off 385 stems of pompon dahlias in peach, coral and burgundy, which look like tissue paper flowers. She and Felts talk shop for a few minutes, agreeing that they should grab coffee sometime, then laughing because, of course, they're both too busy.

GROWING UP ON THE tree farm, Felts was surrounded by plants and dirt. She and her three younger siblings helped out in their father's nursery—two hours of "Pop time" every week spent pruning, mulching, mowing and raking, and later helping with tree inventory. Craig Ruppert, who heads up what is now one of the largest big-tree nurseries east of the Mississippi, taught his brood about business at a young age. Whenever they stopped at a lemonade stand, he was quick to turn the experience into a teachable moment, discussing business concepts like the cost of supplies. "Lemonade cups aren't free," he'd say.

Felts graduated from Our Lady of Good Counsel High School, then located in Wheaton, in 2000. When she and her sister Charlotte were in college at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, they went into the pumpkin business, coming home during fall breaks to sell wholesale and from a roadside stand in Laytonsville. One year, the handheld tiller broke when they were in the first row of planting, with 5 acres to go. Felts remembered an old sign her father had hung in the barn, written in marker on a crooked piece of wood: "Don't despair, but if you do, work on in despair." (They managed to finish the job.) At harvest time, Ruppert would watch his daughters drive off with a pickup truck and trailer full of pumpkins and challenge them not to return until it was empty.

At Virginia Tech, Felts enjoyed college life—"if only it weren't for the classes," she told her mother freshman year—con-



The morning of a wedding, Felts and her team have to pack all the flowers and supplies into her van without damaging anything fragile.

sidered becoming an actress, and met her future husband, Mike. They began dating in February 2004, and shortly after that his National Guard unit deployed to Afghanistan for more than a year. He proposed during a two-week leave. The couple married on the tree farm in October 2005 after dating in person for less than two months. Guests sat at tables

with blue-and-white gingham tablecloths, and the celebration exploded with wildflowers.

The couple moved to Asheville, North Carolina, for five years, where Felts worked at a summer camp for girls, before moving back to the tree farm to start a family. Mike started working as an estimator for Ruppert Nurseries. In

back to her roots



From left: Felts and Conner use magnets to hang eucalyptus in a wedding reception hall; a floral arch assembled on location for a wedding.



2013, Felts was home with three young children, nursing twins and itching to get back to work. One day during nap time she found herself on Pinterest and discovered Erin Benzakein's *Floret*, a farm specializing in uncommon and heirloom flowers in Washington state's Skagit Valley.

Oh my gosh, I want to do that, Felts thought. *That's what I want to be.*

Felts pored over photos of flowering branches, fresh-from-the-garden herbs and asymmetrical bouquets. "I kind of became obsessed," she says. Within days, Felts had signed up for Benzakein's three-day workshop outside of Seattle. In the meantime, she read all of Benzakein's blog posts, visited local flower farmers

and bought seeds. "I went flower crazy."

At the workshop, Felts daydreamed about her future. "Erin got the business end of it and the beautiful flower end of it," she says. "That made sense to me." Felts' father had joined her on the trip. She remembers him saying, "Sophie, is this going to be a hobby or a business?"

Today, Benzakein's book, *Cut Flower Garden*, is Felts' bible, and she keeps it within arm's reach when she's working. "She's a whole empire," Felts says, flipping through the book and commenting on photos. "Mums are typically straight burgundy or white, not burnt-orange with deeper orange tips or mustardy-yellow. Such cool stuff!"

Benzakein says Felts sets her work apart

by foraging on the tree farm and reflecting the seasons. "Sophie's work is really lovely," she says. "The trend toward local, seasonal flowers is rapidly growing, and Sophie is leading the way in her region."

Felts also relies on her local floral tribe, including Sue Prutting of White Magnolia Designs in Potomac. The two met at Benzakein's workshop. Felts called on Prutting to help with her first big job—a 70-centerpiece corporate event that involved branches of baby tomatoes—and considers her a mentor. Felts' sister handles the orders and maintains the budget. "She's the numbers girl, steady and stable," Felts says of McGehee. "I'm more out there, like, 'Chill out—it's all going to work.'" Both women

learned about numbers from their father. “He’d say, ‘The top line—total revenue—feeds your ego,’” Felts says. “‘The bottom line—actual profit—feeds your family.’”

BRIDES START BY FILLING out a questionnaire on Blossom + Vine’s website that covers their wedding style and color scheme. Felts then has what she calls a “hopes and dreams” phone call with the bride, and the occasional groom, using all the phrases that probably make women think she’s a mind reader: “loose and elegant,” “hand-tied bouquet,” “shades of cream and blush.” She talks about twinkly lights, soft seasonal greenery and lush romantic arrangements. Then she puts together a mood board, a collage of inspiring images. Her wedding packages start at \$6,000.

Naturally, Felts encounters the occasional bridezilla who needs to control every detail. But her favorite customers tell her, “Just make me something beauti-

ful with what’s in season now. I trust you.”

Taylor Sevin of Alexandria hired Felts for her September 2017 wedding at Stone Tower Winery in Leesburg. “I wanted it to feel like nature,” Sevin says. “Lush, laid-back, nothing too stuffy.” She also wanted plenty of bright colors to reflect her and her fiancé’s Middle Eastern heritage.

On her wedding day, Sevin was having her hair and makeup done when Felts delivered her bouquet. “It took my breath away,” Sevin says. “It looked like you just walked through a garden and picked up flowers, and that’s exactly what I wanted it to look like.” The couple married under a floral arch in front of 200 guests, with Sevin wearing a flowy organza dress. “I told Sophie I wish I could get married a second time so I could build this creative vision again.”

When it comes time for a wedding, Felts and her staff are in high gear, building arches, hanging giant arrangements over entrances, tying ribbons on chair

backs and moving flowers from the ceremony site to the reception. Now that she has a staff of four, Felts has started thinking about details such as uniforms. She envisions a black jumpsuit, a leather farmer-florist tool belt (which sells for \$175 on Benzakein’s website) and lipstick. Why a jumpsuit? “Because then you can reach up,” Felts says, “and the belly doesn’t show.”

She often thinks of the corny sayings and lessons she learned while growing up on the farm. Her dad, who started his own business when he was 16, still likes to give her advice. “He knows nothing about flowers, but he thinks it’s fun to be involved,” Felts says, laughing. “I think he’s proud of what we’re doing.” His latest quip: Anyone can sell a good steak—you gotta work on the sizzle. ■

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