

Flower Empowered; Group Therapy For Floral Phobics: Urban Petals Designer Arranges a Little Vase Time; [FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (1277 words)

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We are a skillful species, able to pull off complex business deals, program TiVo, perform delicate surgery, sink 40-foot putts and train obstreperous puppies. But flower arranging? For many, that gentle art is one of life's more intimidating endeavors.

Picture a thoroughly savvy shopper standing amid buckets of blooms at the supermarket or florist. Despite a great haircut, stylish clothing, enviable job and terrific house, the flower-gazer's face fairly shouts bafflement: Do soaring gladiolas look good with Gerbera daisies and spiky spider mums, or should the glads go solo? Do ferns suggest lushness, or lack of imagination? Is there a glam alternative to no-fail white tulips?

Many of us identify with this lack of confidence, feeling altogether incapable of approximating -- never mind replicating -- the simple, the dramatic, the romantically excessive arrangements we see in slick magazines, hip restaurants and decorator show houses. Some retreat into tearing the plastic wrap from a street vendor's bouquet and plunking it in water.

Enter Sarah von Schrader, a budding Washington floral designer who has made it her mission to help the florally challenged find their inner artiste.

"There is some mystique about doing flowers. There is a fear that they won't look a certain way" says von Schrader, 25, a Yale history graduate who in February quit her job working with at-risk youth in a community development agency to follow her blooming bliss.

Von Schrader has come up with a way to share her confidence-boosting approach by holding in-home, hands-on workshops for the florally impaired. Like legions of Tupperware hawkers before her, she believes in the power of the house party. And if a bit of food and drink loosens everyone up, so much the better.

She says the simple principles of design -- color, texture and shape -- define the fine arrangement. "For color, you can use all greens, all reds, or two or three colors from the same family, like reds, pinks and oranges, and then the orange will just pop out," she enthuses. "There should be at least two textures that make you want to touch them. You can go spiky with stars of Bethlehem or proteas, and add the smoothness of ti leaves, or furry lamb's ears. Shape would be a reed that goes straight up, and bear grass hanging over the vase, things like . . . eucalyptus leaves fluttering and falling, or willow branches bent and coming back on themselves."

Scale is another factor. "Consider where the flowers are going. You want to be able to see across a table, so you go low or very high. If you have 14-foot ceilings, you might want to go with tall branches to elongate the arrangement."

One of von Schrader's more engaging traits is that she has very little formal training. In 1999, the summer before her senior year, von Schrader lived in New York, where the mother of a college chum was an editor at Garden Design magazine. She asked the woman for names of hot floral designers, then wrote them all volunteering to work as an unpaid intern.

Two designers who took her on were disciples of Christian Tortu, a Frenchman who has revolutionized floral design since the 1970s by crafting seasonal, sumptuous bunches of multihued and monochromatic plant life. Unexpected groupings by color, texture and species are his signature, and last year he was charging more than \$400 per student for classes held at the swank Hotel de Crillon in Paris.

Von Schrader -- who readily admits she doesn't even know the names of all the flowers she uses, and is

hardly a stickler about cutting stems under water or on an angle with a knife, as she was taught in New York -- prefers a more laid-back lab.

On a recent Sunday night, three men and five women gathered in a loft in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, home of graphic designer Kate Damon and real estate agent Brian Kellogg. Flanking two long tables were some 20 buckets of flowers and leaves costing nearly \$400 from Kester Wholesale Floral Co. in Landover. (No retail sales to the public here, alas.)

The evening was a trial run, von Schrader's last teaching rehearsal before she begins charging \$55 to \$75 per student, depending on flowers and other materials. Though the session was scheduled to last 90 minutes, it took her twice as long to cover all the ground. That seemed to please her students, who happily played with orchids, baby pineapples and artichokes; kangaroo paws and proteas; and familiar tulips, mums, snapdragons, irises, ivy, eucalyptus, roses and freesia. Small striped eggplants, pale wax beans, dark plums, lemons and limes, a red cabbage, even cartons of cherries, provided filler for an assortment of inexpensive vases and vessels.

Von Schrader had asked participants to bring their own flower-cutting implements (scissors all around) and any challenging vessel -- teapot, martini glass, tin can -- they wanted to fill with flowers. Phyllis Jones, a former community development colleague, brought a saxophone she had lined with heavy plastic; by the end of the class, it sprouted curly willow, spider mums, orchids and lilies. "I'm taking it to the office tomorrow," she said proudly.

After three hours, von Schrader's charges left with one or more floral creations in hand, not to mention a blossoming sense of confidence. Exclamations of "Wow!" "I did that?" and "This is really great," filled the air.

To be sure, the raw materials were dazzling and profuse. But von Schrader -- who calls her company Urban Petals (202-297-4270 or www.urbanpetals.com) -- insists the same techniques work with ho-hum flowers from the garden, grocery store or street vendor.

"When I bought flowers, they always looked really bad," says Robin Lewis, who after making her large arrangement went to work on several small, low glass squares. One she filled with loose fresh cherries and roses with barely two inches of stem remaining -- three cream, one vivid orange-yellow. The second container she lined with a maroon ti leaf and topped it with orange roses, a chartreuse mum and red berries. "Now I feel I have a much better idea of what to do with them."

Nearby was Barbara von Elm, owner of Growing Wild Floral Co. in Fauquier County, where von Schrader works part-time. She took the class, she said, "because Sarah does things that I don't. In my humble opinion, I am really very good at what I do. She's the only one who's better. She's very good. She looks at the color and textures. You see this all the time in New York. Washington is a floral wasteland. I think Sarah just gets it."

Staffers at Kester's wholesale market are equally high on von Schrader. "What is setting Sarah apart is that she is in here seeing what is changing with the season," says sales manager Diane Westcott. "Not every florist comes here and spends time in the 38-degree cooler. Sarah has a wonderful eye for textures and nontraditionals."

Von Schrader hopes to open her own shop in Washington and, ultimately, an organic, socially responsible flower farm in South America. Until then, she plans to work for von Elm, run house parties and seek more commercial jobs like the weekly arrangements she creates for two Washington restaurants, the 18th Street Lounge and Rice.

Lewis already has plans for von Schrader to conduct a workshop as a bridesmaids' shower for her best friend. "We'd make flower arrangements and then also maybe something she could wear out when we go to a bar as part of the bachelorette weekend."

Without missing a beat, the designer mused: "A headpiece, yes. Something with flowers and pineapples."