

Charlotte Moss *flowers*



RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

the power of a flower

*The creative urge is strong in us and among the
strong emotions of the human heart is
the love of beauty and a desire to create beauty.*

CONSTANCE SPRY

I BELIEVE THERE TO BE two schools of thought on the subject of flower arranging. I have studied the history of flower arranging, observed the work of those I admire, and have examined the work of the great flower painters—all the while practicing almost my entire adult life. Books and observation have been my silent, visual tutors.

As with much in life there is always a group that plays strictly by a book of rules burdened with preconception and concern for conformity. The get-out-the ruler-and-protractor-set, study-the-playbook-line-by-line manner of arranging inhibits spontaneity, experimentation, personalization, and, ultimately, joy. Then there are the ones who basically threw the rule book out the window. I would be part of that group. I have not always been the rebellious type, but when it comes to creative endeavors, I need breathing room. Flower arranging should be a joyous activity, something to look forward to and which provide hours of pleasure. It should not be fraught with anxiety and nail biting. I do understand some people get worked up. There is no test to be passed, no jury to examine, just you. So, if you are from the former school, perhaps you tuck that rule book away and just let the flowers tell you where they want to be. Books and rules are good to guide you, but they should not dictate. Having said all of that, if you need a book or two to guide you, take a look at the booklist on pages 264–67 that I have put together from my own library.





THE GARDEN IN JUNE

THE flowering of the Columbine is the beginning of summer. Tulips and Double Narcissi and straggle Anemones may still afford bright colour or sweet fragrance, but they do not charm us any longer, for they are of the spring, and the spring is past. What a beautiful old flower it is—"the Columbine commendable," as Skelton called it four hundred years ago! Indeed, all the old garden writers mention it, its vigour and grace having always earned it a secure place in the English garden, where it has been grown for centuries "for the delight both of its form and colours." The Columbines of our ancestors were all varieties of the wild English species (*Aquilegia vulgaris*), and so vigorous and handsome do some of these plants become under garden cultivation, that it is questionable if any of the newer kinds surpass them in beauty. However, the various species of *Aquilegia* which have from time to time been added to our garden flora are to be counted with the most valuable of plants, among the best of them being the very curiously coloured red and orange species known as *A. Skinneri*, the tall golden *A. chrysantha*, and, perhaps most beautiful of all, the Rocky Mountain Columbine, *A. cærulea*, with its quaint green "horns of honey."



Rules on volume, composition, shape, color, and suitable containers tend to make me squirm. All I want to do is gather my basket and shears, head to the garden, snip, and head to the flower room with whatever moved me. Similarly, in the city, at the florist or our local market, picking up what appeals is when the fun begins. Over time and with practice you will develop your own style, learn what works together, which flowers require the tall vase, which ones like breathing space. All of this, let me repeat, *all of this*, comes with practice and trial and error. Beware of too much thinking; give your instincts a chance.

Flowers have personalities. Tulips prefer vases straight up and down for support so they can continue to grow as they do. Small flowers, such as violets, often require bundling so they stay together in a vase like a nosegay, a bearded iris sometimes just wants to be alone, while roses, the queens of the garden, can do just about anything they want. What does all this mean, this flower talk? It means: relax, have fun, let your eye and the flowers guide you. Remember, they are flowers, one of mother nature's most glorious and ethereal creations. We marvel at the range of varieties, the colors, their grace, and their fragility. If you have a garden, you are sensitive to each flower and its idiosyncrasies. Maybe that gives you a head start over the non-gardener, but on the other hand, by making friends with the local florists, visiting their shops, and asking questions you will learn not only about the flowers but also, perhaps, some tricks of the trade. In addition to books and, of course, firsthand experience, there are blogs and beautiful Instagram accounts that share expertise, creativity, and a variety of beauty. If you want to learn, you have a wealth of resources just a click away.

PAGE 7 *The flower room in New York City.* OPPOSITE *Books on flowers, historic gardens, personages, plants, and arranging—a number seen here in East Hampton.*

I think about the countless museums I have visited in my life and the number of paintings that have drawn me in. Many of those paintings have been of flowers. In museums around the United States, from the Norton Simon to the Metropolitan, and in numerous iterations from around the globe, from the hieroglyphics in Egypt with lotus blossoms and palm trees, the carnations and tulips of Iznik tiles and ceramics in Istanbul and the delicate wall paintings at Herculaneum and Oplontis: so many memorable sights. I can think of countless examples of floral decoration in cloisonné, micromosaics, porcelains, bas relief, the marquetry of French furniture, and the *lacca povera* perfected by the Italians. Flower memories, near and far.

FLOWER MEMORIES

❁ Clover flowers, daisies, dandelions, and buttercups made great necklaces when I was seven. I loved the hours with cousins spent painstakingly threading them, with the reward of feeling bejeweled and dressed up. Necklace-making was a competitive sport back then—whose was the longest and the prettiest with the most flowers.

❁ On May Day in first grade all the girls in my class dressed in smocked frocks and danced around the maypole clutching a single lily in our hands. We did as we were told, I guess it was fun, I can't

From my travel diary. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Hieroglyphics in an ancient temple in Egypt. | Detail of trompe-l'oeil murals in the Bergl Rooms at Schönbrunn Palace, Vienna, Austria, painted by Johann Wenzel Bergl at the request of Empress Maria Theresa. | Delicately carved flowers in marble at the Taj Mahal, India. | Frescoed wall decoration at Oplontis, Italy, executed before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, and preserved underground until rediscovered in the nineteenth century.

remember anything but the smell of the lilies. The power of a flower.

❁ As a teenager, I remember gathering “running cedar” in the woods on trail rides to bring back and watching my mother whip up some green magic—decorations for our house such as wreaths and topiaries; whatever it was, it made everything at home look prettier, fancier, more festive.

❁ At other times I would take plastic cups on those rides, praying to discover wild lady slipper orchids in the woods. One solitary pink blossom to bring home. I can smell them right now.

❁ I remember the blanket of wild violets that covered the ground around my grandfather's beagle house and my grandmother's rows of violet, brown, and amber-colored bearded iris, and the pink crape myrtle that dusted the driveway with their pink “snow.”

❁ Some of these flower memories transport me to an age of innocence, a carefree time where days at the river began with pancakes and ended with ice cream while sitting on the pier. In between, I remember lounging on the large floral-printed bark cloth cushions sitting on my grandmother's deep ruby-colored wicker.

❁ Do you remember the first time you wore a boutonniere or a corsage? Who gave it to you, what was the occasion, what were you wearing? Was it a dance, a prom, a wedding? Another rite of passage into adulthood where flowers paved the way. Do you remember the first time someone arrived at your front door with a flower delivery and it was for *you*? The excitement of it all, the anticipation opening the card! Or when a bouquet arrived at your office and everyone gathered around to hear who it was from? I remember how important those moments



were, those “flower firsts.” Although I must admit I have few recollections of specific flowers or the person, aside from a school dance or two.

♣ Scroll forward. Who could forget the songs of the 1960s summoning you: “If you’re going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.” I am sure I wore a ring of flowers in my hair to some outdoor concert back then, but I didn’t make it to San Francisco until later. We were flower children then, espousing peace and love. Who didn’t want more peace and more love? *Plus ça change . . .*

♣ I remember the floor-through apartment I shared with three women during my senior year of college. Every once in a while, one of those straw-wrapped

Chianti bottles got repurposed as a vase. Maybe that’s when I realized that anything can be a vase and that it only takes a few blossoms to perk up a room.

♣ Years later, I remember I bought some flowers for my office on Wall Street. A small windowless space with regulation-issue corporate furniture, white walls, and industrial-strength carpet; it needed help. I remember a great shop in Greenwich Village where I bought two baskets for my in- and out-boxes. They were beautiful and a little out of my budget, but I thought they were elegant. Next came a simple vase

ABOVE Works of art are a constant inspiration. Here: Frédéric Bazille, Young Woman with Peonies, 1870. OPPOSITE A sampling of arrangements.





with flowers. After installing those three items, which I thought would be the most the office could handle, it was business as usual. Until two male stockbrokers came in and “for my own good” informed me that no one was going to take me seriously now; my new additions were not very corporate. Poor souls that they were . . . I wonder where they are now? Torturing a wife somewhere, micromanaging her attempts to make things better, prettier, happier. Maybe that was one of the turning points in my life, the moment I realized I was not long for that world. I am so glad to be writing *this* book rather than one on liquid yield option notes.

❖ I will never forget my first trip to Chatsworth with the American Friends of the Georgian Group, which was just getting started in the United States. After lunch and touring some of the house with Deborah (“Debo”), then Duchess of Devonshire, we went to explore the gardens, past the cascade, the Paxton

greenhouses, the famous Willow Tree Fountain, and on to the lupine garden. Never have I ever seen, or seen since, such a display of lupines in all their glory. The rainbow palette of blossoms standing almost human-sized, as if they anticipated our visit. That image remains so clear. The power of a flower.

❖ Once you have been to Sissinghurst witnessing its white garden at its peak, you’ve reached a pinnacle. Knowing its history and origin as a ruin, nothing can compare. Sissinghurst is gardening mecca.

❖ My visit to Château de Chenonceau in the Loire Valley is memorable for a number of reasons. Its rich history, the gallery over the bridge that connects the

ABOVE Lupines, photographed during a visit to Chatsworth in the late 1980s. *OPPOSITE* Details of the garden at Sissinghurst, the result of a true gardening marriage. Harold Nicolson created the plan while his wife, Vita Sackville-West, the romanticist, put meat on its bones—she was the one who knew flowers.

château to the other side of the River Cher, and the flowers in the rooms open to the public. Somewhere in my pile of photos is a picture of a delicate basket filled with *fraises de bois* trained over a miniature trellis sitting on a seventeenth-century oak table. I will never forget it. This fragile fruit, supported as if espaliered, was a little wonder that would have inspired Fabergé.

♣ On the opening night of the Chelsea Flower Show—one of many visits to this floral extravaganza in London—my husband and I were in a marquee sponsored by his bank. I think it took a couple of British bankers to convince this American banker that the opening night, when the Queen visits the show, is *the night tout le monde* attends. My husband, somewhat skeptical, asked my opinion. Of course I emphatically answered *yes*. As we walked through one of the exhibition stands that evening, my husband heard his name being called. He turned to find the chairman of the Bank of England standing under a bower of David Austin roses. Never again did those bankers ever have to convince him that a flower show in London was an important corporate event. The power of a flower.

♣ Arriving at a dinner party in Paris in a beautiful and romantic *hôtel particulier*—the mural-wrapped entry gallery illuminated by candlelight—was the dramatic beginning of the evening. Dinner guests walked down a stone gallery, turning slightly to descend stone steps. The portieres on either side of the entry screened the surprise around the corner, but the fragrance announced roses. There, on two large, skirted, and *objet*-filled round tables were large baskets with rosebushes in full bloom. Garden roses in a perfect state of voluptuousness gently staked with bamboo and tied neatly with raffia, they stood six feet tall. I can't remember my dinner partner that evening, but the roses I will never forget.

In colors of sapphire, topaz, and amber, the irises at Parc de Bagatelle in their brief moment of glory are a flower lover's dream.



♣ On another visit to France my husband and I arrived early one morning and were driven to the Beaujolais region for our stay at the Château de Bagnols. Upon arrival, still half asleep from the trip, we followed the gentleman with our luggage through a covered passageway to the château. Suddenly, I was awakened by a powerful fragrance. But where and what? Then it hit me: lavender. It was lavender, but where? Then I looked up. The entire ceiling of the passage was covered with bundles of lavender hanging to dry. I knew this was a very good sign for our visit; my expectations were now duly heightened. The lavender could have hung in any number of places at a large château, but the selection of that spot to greet and seduce was perfection.

♣ Irises are some of my earliest flower memories. The tall bearded iris variety that my grandmother had in her garden in Virginia. I mostly remember the unusual palette; I had never seen flowers that were brown, amber, and blue. I assumed these were rare specimens that my grandmother obtained somewhere, because most gardens I had seen up to that point were explosions of yellows and oranges, and reds mixed with pinks and purples. I also remember that when she picked them, her bouquet seemed stingy to me at the time; three, maybe five stems. I know I never asked her “Why not more?” because she was my grandmother and like most children I just assumed she knew all. Besides, I did not have a clue back then about such concepts as simplicity and restraint. Now I see that that thing I called stinginess is simple elegance. One graceful stem of a bearded iris with its tissue paper petals *is* an arrangement.

An allée of laburnum at Haseley Court, in the garden created by Nancy Lancaster, with a spiderweb bench inviting one to sit and enjoy it all.

♣ Years later, on what would be one of many visits to the Petit Hameau at Versailles, I noticed irises growing along the rooflines of the thatched structures, a curiously beautiful and puzzling sight. My research later revealed that these flowers—a low-growing variety from Japan called *iris tectorum*—actually prolong the life of a thatch roof, thriving there while absorbing excess water. As the story goes, this dainty creature ended up on rooftops in Japan after a long-ago emperor declared land to be too valuable for growing flowers in a postwar era. Hence, up to the rooftops they went.

♣ Fast forward, and once again in France, I was visiting the horticultural school at Château de Chaumont in the Loire Valley, as well as the flower show at Château de Courson, with my sister Cathy. It was May, and gardens everywhere were competing for the attention of gardeners and tourists. We were returning to Paris in the late afternoon, and I asked our driver, Henner, to make a detour to Parc de Bagatelle because we were only minutes away. While it was too early in the season for the display of roses there, it was the perfect time of day, the golden hour, to experience the place. The bearded irises were at their peak, with the beautiful light dancing from bed to bed and the blossoms proudly standing shoulder to shoulder. Every once in a while, the light caught the luminous petals, transforming them into sapphires, amethysts, and golden amber. In this intimate enclosure there were only a few people, and we waited patiently for them to leave. Then, we had the entire garden to ourselves. That time I can only describe as being something close to what heaven must be like. I have never seen an iris garden like that since and consider myself lucky for having been there at that

magical moment. It was then that I made the promise to myself to make time for irises in my life. To do my homework, select varieties, and do what my grandmother did years ago. There is more work to be done, and there are more varieties to collect, more flowers to be enjoyed.

♣ Decades later, the challenge of childhood necklace-making has been replaced with decorating, gardening, and entertaining. Traveling to places far and near has afforded opportunities to observe beauty in more ways than I imagined possible. These quests have been solo, as well as in the company of kindred spirits—old friends and new, and as luck would have it, all with similar interests and points of view. Simultaneous sighs while experiencing display gardens at London’s Chelsea Flower Show, the brilliant yellow of the laburnum tunnel at Haseley Court, the Chinese Room at Kelmars Hall, and the Saloon at Ditchley Park decorated with urns of flowers and candlelit with tables set for dinner—our own.

♣ Scroll back a few years, when I called Margot Shaw and proposed putting a group together to see Nancy Lancaster’s three houses in England. Phone calls back and forth; invitations extended; Indagare, our travel advisor, engaged; and date set. We stayed at Ditchley Park, venturing on private tours of the other houses and gardens, places that Lancaster created on English soil with her indomitable American spirit and highly evolved instinct for all things beautiful. Lancaster would herself claim that she was “always searching for beauty.” Her three essentials for a successful room have become the mantra of her disciples: a fire, candlelight, and flowers.

♣ Beautiful houses, châteaux, gardens—there are so many more memorable visits, but there was

a particular moment that really touched me. While in London on a buying trip for my store years ago, I found myself stopped dead in traffic on the Gloucester Road. (In the days before mobile phones, people were more keenly focused on their surroundings than what appeared on a tiny screen.) After a moment, I looked up at the second-floor window of a large brick Victorian building. There on the windowsill sat five green Perrier bottles, each holding a tulip. I grabbed my camera and snapped that shot. An image I can see today, where someone recycled five bottles with as many tulips to make their own statement of beauty. How easy it was to make that view prettier for them and the lucky passersby. I have used that slide in numerous lectures I have given. The act was so simple, the message very powerful.

These memories were the beginning of a long path to a world filled with observing, admiring, emulating, and attempting to create beauty—oftentimes with flowers.

I could continue on with flower memories and in fact more may surface throughout this book. I am not one for nostalgia, but it’s difficult to write about this subject without the thread of memory that compelled me to start recalling them in the first place. Flower power.

This book began its life literally as a diary of the ten-plus years I have spent documenting flower arrangements in two houses. Never did I think the

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A footed basket filled with garden roses on the living room mantel in East Hampton. | Dinner in the garden in New York City, a tablescape of delicate petunia-filled baskets. | A mixed arrangement of Japanese anemones, roses, hydrangeas, astrantia, and greens—all from the garden—in a basket from Colefax & Fowler. | The famous saloon at Ditchley Park, decorated for dinner during my visit there.



documentation would become a book, because the record-keeping was just for myself and shot mostly with a digital camera and an iPhone. Ten years on, I have accumulated masses of photographs recording hundreds of arrangements.

In a meeting one day with my publisher Charles Miers and my editor Philip Reeser, I described a couple of potential books. When I said we could do a book on flowers that would be primarily images, Charles immediately and characteristically quipped, “Charlotte, you cannot do a book with mostly photos. That’s not in your DNA. You are a teacher, and it’s too important for you that readers learn something, that they have useful takeaways.”

So, as Charles predicted, here we are, in the expanded and hopefully improved version of my first proposal, a record of some of those arrangements, some “takeaways” as Charles would say, and a little history through the eyes of some notable women who made flowers an integral part of their lives. So much has been written about the lives of these women, but here I have chosen to focus on one shared passion. In the French countryside, London, New York, and Virginia, all pursued very different lives, but each one, either in her own home or in those of others, left behind a trail of that ephemeral thing we call style. All flowers were embraced, including the weeds in the field and along the roadside, and the outliers on the lawn. At first glance, the women featured here may seem like a rather disparate group, but one common thread is their embrace of beauty. Each of these women spent a lifetime pursuing beauty, singing its virtues, creating it in their own private universe and for the world at large.

For years I have been documenting my flower diary, cataloguing my flower arrangements, and mounting the photographs in handmade books.

Most importantly they created to please themselves. The natural, mixed bouquets of Gertrude Jekyll; the wild, woolly, tour-de-force combinations of Constance Spry; the omnipresence of flower arrangements, floral fabrics, and botanical art in the residences of Lee Radziwill. Each of these women contributed to a floral legacy in which anyone can find inspiration. Their unique styles, the result of instinct and intuition, coupled with study, confidence, and discipline, have collectively left us a visual handbook to guide us, to nurture us, and to inspire us.

This is not a history book. If it does, however, pique your interest in history in any way, start with the booklist at the back of this book. I recall some of my first books purchased in the 1970s. Later, in the ’80s, while traveling to England and France on a regular basis, I picked up books not only in bookstores but also at antiques shops, flea markets, country fairs, museum shops, and auctions. Most libraries grow slowly over time and require editing every now and then. Be patient with your acquisitions so that each one will take on greater meaning.

I have learned many things while arranging flowers. I have learned to trust my own instincts, to shake off preconceived notions about the proper ways to do things, and to be open-minded, as anything that can be plucked from anywhere can find its way into a vase. I have experimented and continue to do so, and I have continued to collect anything that might enjoy life as a vase. I have learned by reading about how others do things, I have visited flower gardens and collections, and I have studied books and paintings, but most of all I have just enjoyed getting to know my flowers and observing how they like to be arranged. The *power* of a flower. ♣