

DESIGN & DECORATING

Into the Woods...and Parking Lots

Floral designers are foraging plants in the most unlikely locations and creating beauty with the seemingly motley booty

BY COURTNEY BARNES

Peering into a posh storefront window along Old Bond Street in the late 1920s, Londoners surely didn't expect to see urns spilling over with wild clematis gone to seed, hops and simple berry-covered autumn branches. But that is what then-budding florist Constance Spry had daringly arranged for Atkinsons perfumery. Mixing humble flora scavenged in the countryside with a modicum of shop-bought green orchids, she charmed passersby and changed the fashionable set's perceptions of what a bouquet could be. Later, Spry would use masses of delicate cow parsley, aka Queen Anne's lace, at the wedding of Lady Violet Bonham Carter's daughter, Laura.

Today, Spry's influence is newly relevant. As uniform, commercial bouquets yield to looser, more organic arrangements, a fresh crop of intrepid designers are finding scavenging alluring again.

Louesa Roebuck and Sarah Lonsdale, co-authors of "Foraged Flora" (*Ten Speed Press*), believe the current impulse to gather roadside vegetation is a natural offshoot of the trend toward eating seasonal, local produce that you might have even foraged yourself. Plants such as wispy wild fennel, stretching up to 12 feet in length and not typically sold in a florist's shop, have a rarefied, wayward beauty that sets them apart from mass-grown blooms, said the authors.

‘Choosing to see natural beauty everywhere is much of the art. It’s right in front of our eyes.’

"I've been bringing home strays—flora and animals—since I was four," said Ms. Roebuck, a California-based artist who took a circuitous path to working with flowers professionally. In the early 2000s, she was hauling unusual grasses and bundles of fennel into her own boutique-cum-gallery space, hanging them beside clothes by avant-garde Belgian designer Martin Margiela. She refused to use out-of-season, imported flowers, partly because of her environmental ethos but also because flower-market offerings bored her.

Her scavenged installations did not go unnoticed, and after the 2008 economic crisis closed her shop, Ms. Roebuck



F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, FLORAL STYLING BY AMY MERRICK (TOP); LAURIE FRANKEL/TEN SPEED PRESS

ONE MAN'S WEEDS For this arrangement, Brooklyn floral designer Amy Merrick collected shrub-rose hips from a road median, fennel flower from a friend's garden and goldenrod from an abandoned parking lot. See an identification guide to all the plants she used at wsj.com/design.

found herself arranging flowers for Vivienne Westwood, Berkeley restaurant Chez Pannisse and the wedding of photographer Todd Selby and Danielle Sherman, co-founder of fashion house the Row. Eschewing a conventional bouquet, Ms. Sherman carried a spare trailing passion vine— foraged from a chain-link fence on a construction site in L.A.'s Koreatown—interlaced with orchids purchased from Sonoma County grower California Carnivores.

"People are told too many rules when it comes to arranging," said Ms. Roebuck. "If an uber-long vine makes you happy, bring it on in and let it meander over the edge of a table or across a bookshelf. Personally I like very large arrangements kept loose and uncontrived, or minute clippings." In journalist Kevin West's Los Angeles apartment, she draped a 19th-century portrait with a louché cache of passionflower vines she'd found in a Marin County park rangers' equipment lot and removed with the blessing of a friendly ranger.

Ms. Roebuck also mixes in magnolia branches, which show all stages of the blossom's life cycle, from bud to aged leathery petals. Frequently the limbs are headed for the city wood chipper when she finds them.



GREEN SWEEP In a Napa Valley home, flora designer Louesa Roebuck, co-author of 'Foraged Flora' (*Ten Speed Press*) combined roses cut from the homeowner's garden with a foraged 7-foot wild rose cane.

"You don't have to own a truck and drive around for hours to bring non-floral-shop elements into your home," she said, "Keep your eyes open. Talk to the landscaper clipping foliage down the street. Or search your back-

yard for a nearly microscopic wild violet waiting to be placed in the tiniest glass."

Have a pair of hand pruners on hand, too. Amy Merrick, a Brooklyn floral designer, educator and Spry devotee, walked into a law of-

fice asking for permission to cut, and pay for, a discrete clipping of wild jasmine she spied climbing up the side of the building.

"Choosing to see natural beauty everywhere is so much of the art, and I find it empowering that all of these things are right in front of our eyes if we just start to look," said Ms. Merrick.

Recently she combed through alleyways and friends' yards for untended rain-tree pods and evergreen branches, some of which ended up in a creation for *Vogue*, and she encourages her workshop students to hunt for their own plant material, even weeds growing in sidewalk cracks. "I've learned that arrangements look truly natural, rather than 'faux natural,' when you do this."

On her solar-powered farm, Mandy O'Shea, a horticulturist, farmer and floral designer based near Athens, Ga., grows uncommon varieties of dahlia, garden roses, ranunculus, anemone and more for her design business. But she also likes to use foraged elements—native per-simmon, Jackson vine, sweet autumn clematis and even naturally shed feathers—in her arrangements.

"When working on a party or wedding, I prefer to forage at least some of my foliage

from the site, if allowed. It makes the décor more relevant and unforced," she said. But be aware of some guidelines, advised Ms. O'Shea. Besides getting permission to snip, use a guidebook to avoid plants that are poisonous, protected, an important food source for wildlife or hyper-allergenic; and stay clear of invasive plants with viable seeds so you don't inadvertently spread them.

Ms. O'Shea often knocks on strangers' doors when she spies a beauty in someone's yard: "I've never been turned away and have actually met some really nice people this way." Even in the wilderness, though, be sure to leave at least 75% of a plant (and much more for trees), allowing future propagation. Wherever you are, Ms. Merrick added, "It should look as if you were never there."

Ultimately, foraged items in arrangements get people talking, said Ms. O'Shea. "They see this pod that maybe they have never seen before or plants they've always considered weeds brought to light in a new and flattering way. When we find a familiar object in a completely different context, it forces us to re-evaluate the world ever so slightly, and I love that."

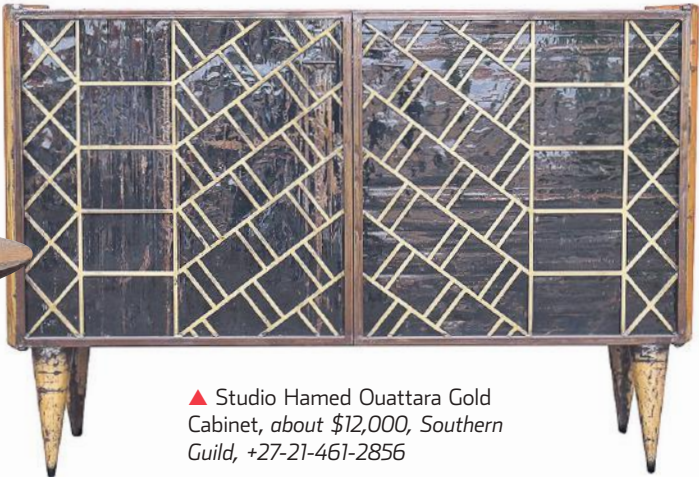
AFRICAN SCENE

From upcycled oil drums to culture-clash chairs, the best of the continent's modern design



▲ Patricia Urquiola Sefefo Color Series Dining Table by Mabeo, \$3,800, Mabeo, +267-390-8736

◀ Ijoko Alejo Chair from Home Affairs Collection, \$1,557, Yinka Ilori, +44-74-3808-8669



▲ Studio Hamed Ouattara Gold Cabinet, about \$12,000, Southern Guild, +27-21-461-2856

ALTHOUGH THE NEW BOOK "Africa Rising" (*Gestalten*) asks that Africa be regarded as a continent of distinct countries, not one vague idea, the works of design it features share a characteristic: storytelling. "Gold" is the name that designer and manufacturer Hamed Ouattara, a Burkina Faso resident, pointedly gave his cabinet, made of recycled materials such as oil barrels. "The piece is about how one man's trash can become another man's treasure," he said. Of the case's art deco-flavored facade, inspired by traditional ancestral textiles, the Paris-educated designer added, "I would say art deco is African."

London artist Yinka Ilori, born of a Nigerian couple, fused his and his parents' cultures by covering

a scavenged British café chair with colorful geometry inspired by ceremonial Nigerian textiles in a piece called Ijoko Alejo ("Guest Chair," part of a 2015 art installation). "I always felt jealous that [my parents] had this bold heritage," said Mr. Ilori.

The Sefefo Color Series Dining Table also speaks to cultural cross-pollination. For this table of panga wood, Botswana designer Peter Mabeo and his team applied traditional woodworking to Spaniard Patricia Urquiola's design, adding energetic yellow paint at her suggestion to the hand-fluted pedestal. "It is an expression of relationships between people from different parts of the world," said Mr. Mabeo.

—Augusta Greenbaum

VEERLE EVENS (CHAIR)