



Hearts and Flowers

LIBBY SPENCER IS SURROUNDED BY EXQUISITE BLOOMS AT BOTANICA FLORA, HER FLOWER SHOP IN ORANGE, NSW.

WORDS BARBARA SWEENEY PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT



ORANGE NSW PEOPLE

Branches of crabapple blossom and snapdragons sit on the windowsill at the former Botanica Flora shop. Foliage from a fan plant and a mass of colourful flowers, including plump red waratahs, fill the shop floor. **FACING PAGE** Florist, Libby Spencer, works on a posie of local 'Perfect White' roses and snapdragons. To the left are some of grower Craig Scott's flannel flowers from East Coast Wild Flowers and 'Honey Dijon' roses from B&B Roses in Glenorie.

LIGHT FLOODS THE WHITEWASHED SPACE at the rear of The Collective — a local hotspot, complete with a café, florist and fashion shop — on Lords Place in Orange, NSW. It's here, in the large open space of a former printery, that husband and wife team Libby Spencer and Rene Reimers have set up shop as florist and landscaper.

You arrive at Botanica Flora, Libby's flower shop, and Rene's Botanic Landscapes business, via Maddy and Toby Howell's café Good Eddy and locally run fashion shop Belle Armoire. The space, resplendent with parquet flooring and colourful art on the walls, is crowded with vessels and vases filled with flowers and foliage. Waxy dark green leaves of *Grandiflora magnolia* contrast with the slim, silvery leaves of the olive sprays alongside. Branches of crabapple blossom, cut from wild roadside trees, arch over the tabletop. Perfect white tulips, real, old-fashioned roses, the ones that open and fill the room with perfume, and tiny pots of succulents in all shapes and sizes cover every surface. It's all a welcoming riot of colour and beauty.

Further on, there's a second space containing Libby's workshop; where she makes up her in-demand arrangements, as well as Rene's drawing boards and what remains of the building's past — a Ludlow typesetting machine and hefty Heidelberg offset printing press. "The space makes me happy," says Libby. "It has a really nice feeling."

Looking back on their previous lives as ski instructors, Libby and Rene wouldn't have guessed that they'd become small business owners in Orange. "We met in the Victorian Alps, where we were both working," says Libby. "I was there because I wanted to try something different — I'd been working in fine dining in Sydney, at Neil Perry's Rockpool and with Matt Moran at Aria — and had always wanted to try skiing, so I tried out for a job and got it."

Later, when the pair became engaged and were expecting their first child, Saskia, now 11, they found the nesting instinct kicked in on a visit to Libby's parents, John and

Anne Spencer, in Orange. "Being around Mum and in Orange, we knew we didn't want to traipse from one end of the globe to another with a baby in tow," says Libby. "So, we looked at property and before we knew it we had bought a bank in Millthorpe and finished with skiing." The couple's second child, Tully, 10, arrived soon after.

Once settled, Rene began studying — undertaking a landscaping course with the local TAFE — and Libby opened a small shop in Millthorpe selling art, books and coffee. It was here, working alongside her friend Libby McFeeters, a florist in the Blue Mountains for many years, that she started to learn about flowers. "I feel as though I did a pseudo-apprenticeship with her," says Libby.

Then, in 2010, Libby's father bought a nursery with a café attached in Orange, and everyone got involved: Libby jumped in to run the café, selling her Millthorpe business, Rene managed the nursery and John did everything else.

"Customers kept asking if we did cut flowers and eventually I decided to jump in," says Libby. "We started with small posies, then wedding bouquets and it just went from there."

Libby is a modern florist. "It's about having good flowers and letting them do what they want to do," she says. "This is the link for me, the thread that joins everything I've done together. It's about taking the idea of having really good food and not doing too much to it, and applying that to flowers. I like putting flowers together in combinations that sing."

Botanica Flora sources flowers from near and far. "It's a global industry," says Libby. "At any one time, I might have peonies from Amsterdam or orchids from Vietnam in the shop. Depending on the time of year we also have hydrangeas, old-fashioned camellia varieties and foliage such as Japanese maple, magnolia, wattle, grevilleas, spruce and fir that my parents grow on their farm. We're also really lucky to get local peonies, including the lovely heirloom varieties 'Sarah Bernhardt' and 'Marie Lemoine'."

The Sydney Flower Market is where Libby catches up with her suppliers and hunts out exquisite blooms. "I want to see what's happening and who's got amazing things," she says. "There are small growers who pop up from time to time who may have the most beautiful dahlias in the most amazing colour. That's the stuff you can't order over an email or in a text message. You have to seek these people out."

It's this ever-changing selection of flowers that you simply don't see everywhere else, as well as Libby's passion for all things botanical, that sets Botanica Flora apart. But the physical experience of the shop also brings joy. "Being surrounded by beauty is amazing," she says. "There are times when you hold out one rose or one perfect waterlily and you almost tear up. It can be so overwhelming sometimes, how beautiful things are." *CS*

Botanica Flora and Botanic Landscapes have recently moved to The Collective, 187 Lords Place, Orange. (02) 6361 0857; botanicaflora.com.au and botaniclandscapes.com.au. Follow @botanicaflora on Instagram.



CLOCKWISE Some tools of the floristry trade; Libby arranging a bunch of 'Quicksand' roses at her new shop, surrounded by proteas, black ornamental kale and orchids, among other botanical treasures; burgundy ranunculus; the *Rose Cottage* artwork by Orange-based artist, Larissa Blake, hangs behind a table of flowers, including roses and hybrid delphinium.



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY PIP FARQUHARSON