



rich pickings

Blessed with an eye for fabulous florals and a love of nature, Sydney florist Ferdinando de Freitas of Garlands proves less is more when it comes to beautiful blooms

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When Ferdinando de Freitas was five years old, he was found stealing plant cuttings from his neighbour's overflowing garden. When his parents caught him in the act – a glossy green succulent sprout in one hand and a pair of blunt scissors in the other – the only explanation little Ferdinando could give them was that he “wanted to experiment with how things grew. I still remember the look on my neighbour's face,” chuckles Ferdinando, who grew up on a banana plantation on a small semi-tropical island off Portugal. “I knew it was wrong, but I was absolutely obsessed with collecting every plant I could get my hands on.”

The budding botanist received a sharp rap on the knuckles but nature in all its incarnations had already planted a seed that would one day bloom into Sydney's most famed floral destination, Garlands, and turn Ferdinando into one of the city's most in-demand florists.

Spend five minutes with Ferdinando and you'll discover what it means to have a calling – long stemmed roses are effortlessly arranged and in his hands, a bunch of branches is gracefully transformed into a sculptural work of art. Whether he's crafting fantastical floral creations

Ferdinando {above left} is adept at creating stunning, yet subtle, table arrangements. “Flowers on the dining table should never be imposing – the food is the star!” he says. “Keep arrangements low and use fresh flowers and water. Highly fragranced roses, gardenias or orientals are a no-no [their scent will interfere with the food's aroma]. And if your table isn't stable, it's an accident in the making!” Hydrangeas {above right} are among his favourite blooms enjoying a style revival. “They're quite busy so they work best on their own,” he advises. “They should overhang the vase by a fair margin and due to their weight, the vase needs to be really sturdy. They thrive in almost all places around the home, but direct sunlight will cause them to wilt.”

at his Surry Hills store, or casually throwing together bunches of field flowers to grace his mantelpiece at home, Ferdinando sets himself apart from his contemporaries by mimicking nature in its untouched state.

“Voluminous blooms, wild field flowers and single stems are really having a resurgence at the moment, which makes me so happy,” he enthuses. “At the moment, we're selling beautiful bunches of field roses, where every rose is a different shape and colour, like they have just been picked from the garden. We're also seeing bold, bright and vibrant colours. Think Christian Lacroix and Pucci – blocks of colour mixed together in

combinations that pop.”

After bidding Portugal farewell and arriving in Australia at the age of 17, Ferdinando spent his spare time searching the streets of Sydney for the perfect flowers to fill his home, spending hundreds of dollars

on just-picked jonquils and rare succulents. His hunger temporarily fed each week, Ferdinando plugged away at hospitality jobs, followed by a stint as a monorail driver, until “the repetition drove me crazy!” he exclaims. At 33, when most of his friends were well established in their chosen careers, Ferdinando decided to leave the monorail behind >

“Flowers are naturally beautiful – an artificial arrangement will take away that raw beauty”



Ferdinando can't resist filling his home with fresh flowers from his store, Garlands. **Phalaenopsis orchids**, from \$8/bloom, **Pilea foliage**, from \$24/bunch, **Celosia**, from \$18/bunch. Opposite, top left: **Pilea foliage**, from \$24/bunch, **roses**, from \$15/bunch, **succulent**, from \$18. Top right: **Hydrangeas**, from \$40/bunch, **Copper Beech foliage**, from \$30/bunch.



“Bud vases filled with single stems are simple to arrange and need little space”

and enrolled in a floristry course. The rest, as they say, is history. “When people – especially men – discover that I’m a florist and have been for eight years, they can’t hide their shock,” Ferdinando reveals. “But ... you’re a man!” they say. It’s sad that stereotype still exists.”

When he’s not getting his hands dirty at Garlands, trawling the flower markets at 5am or creating statement pieces for high-profile events (Chanel, Lindt, Kirribilli House and Champagne Mumm are regular clients), Ferdinando retreats to his sun-drenched home in Sydney’s inner-west. It’s a grand yet cosy affair: vivid artwork boasting bright jewel hues and nature motifs grace the walls, cool-to-touch stone sculptures adorn mantelpieces and candles burn brightly throughout. Inside, flowers fill every room but, in true Ferdinando style, there are no fussy arrangements and no stilted styling – just honest, natural blooms filling the space with happiness and heady scents. Succulents in mosaic pots line every inch of his verandah, a magnificent pink bougainvillea spills over his pergola – it’s no wonder the nature addict cites his home as his “sanctuary that keeps me sane.” But there’s no rest for this floral fanatic: at the crack of dawn the next morning, you’ll find Ferdinando scouring the flower markets for his current obsession: magnolias. “They die quickly – which sounds like a bizarre reason to love them but when their white petals start to go brown, it’s a glorious golden brown that still smells incredible,” he says, eyes lighting up and a look of utter contentment on his face. A true calling indeed.

For more details and to order flowers online, visit garlands.net.au.

Right: Ferdinando has had a life-long love affair with succulents. “I love their symmetry and toughness; they remind me of home,” he explains. “I used to be faithful to agaves, but have since branched out into any type I can get my hands on. If you want them to grow quickly, lots of water is the key. Just make sure the soil drains really well – put a thick layer of cheap stones, such as blue metal, at the bottom of the pot.” >



Above: An array of bud vases with single stems makes for an understated display. “Take any striking tall single flower stem, such as orchids, peonies or roses, and arrange in a single vase on your mantelpiece, bedside table, or bathroom. Use groups of three to fill out a space.” **Roses**, from \$15/bunch. **Left:** A vivid artwork by Jeannie Petyarre provides a backdrop for ‘Green Trick’ carnations, from \$21/bunch, and succulents, from \$18.





Above: When dressing the table for a casual gathering outdoors, Ferdinando loves to create a quaint country garden look. "Line the centre of the table with simple vases or terracotta tubs, and fill with a mixture of hydrangeas, poppies, peonies, tulips and branches from your garden," he advises. "Keep it low and simple. Often I forget the flowers and use small potted plants, like herbs or little daisy bushes."

Flower arrange like a florist

1. "Ensure you buy the right flowers for the right place, as heat and sunlight are damaging to most cut flowers."
2. "Use tall vases for tall flowers and vice versa, and avoid 'V'-shaped vases as they can be difficult to arrange in."
3. "Always buy a few more stems than you think you need and use leaves to break up the monotony."
4. "Remove leaves below the water line - they'll rot the water."
5. "Cut stems at an angle with sharp secateurs, as frayed stems will hinder water uptake."
6. "When arranging, make little stories of different things and try to arrange the flowers in your hands. Bind the stems together with some twine or fishing wire rather than trying to arrange them in the vase - the whole thing will just fall apart!"
7. "For long-lasting flowers, fresh water every three days is an absolute must, and re-cut the stems daily if you can. Doing this is much better than any flower preserver out there." 