

PEOPLE ALBANY WA

Flower farmer Helen Leighton, husband Jim and Mallee the golden retriever pup take in the western view over the Kalgan River. **FACING PAGE** A bucket of dried strawflowers (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*).

# GROW AND GATHER

GARDEN DESIGNER TURNED FLOWER FARMER HELEN LEIGHTON TAKES A DREAMY APPROACH TO FLORISTRY IN ALBANY, WA.

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FRENCH ANTIQUE URNS overflow with billowy garden roses and blousy dahlias, while footed vases spill over with frilly, fragrant sweet peas and elegant foxgloves. This is the work of Helen Leighton, a floral designer who blends traditional cut flowers with Australian native botanicals.

Set beside the Kalgan River near Albany on the southern tip of Western Australia, Riverdale Farm is a 40-hectare property where, for almost 18 years, Helen has been growing and designing with the changing palette of the seasons. “I consciously capture the wild and romantic spirit of our garden for my design work,” Helen says. “The seasons are a never-ending source of inspiration.”

Gardening has been a lifelong passion for Helen. Starting her working life as a midwife, then managing the busyness of life with young children, her next chapter involved turning that passion into a career by studying garden design at the Inchbald School of Design in London. However, Helen soon realised it wasn't quite the right fit. “I was becoming frustrated with time spent at the computer, and longed to be in the garden,” she recalls.

While doing some research for her daughter Abbey's gap year in London, Helen stumbled upon a different way of designing with flowers: “I came across a style of floristry that was utterly captivating. It was as though a whole new world had suddenly opened up.” She became enthralled by UK florists Zita Elze, Sarah Raven and Fiona Pickles,

and studied their work closely. Helen and her husband Jim, a country GP, have family links with the UK; Jim's father is British, and the couple made frequent trips to the UK when their son Alistair, now 32, was working in Scotland. During those visits, Helen squeezed in training with her floral heroes.

This training, coupled with her background in garden design, gave Helen the confidence to swap the computer for snips and vases. She has been growing beautiful blooms at Riverdale Farm for floral design ever since. “Designing with our homegrown blooms, often grown from seed, is satisfying to the core,” Helen says. “Our cut flowers, all grown outside in the elements, symbolise the beauty and imperfection of the natural world. I find a wonky stem adds character to an arrangement!”

Riverdale boasts a cool climate and a reliable water source, enabling Helen and Jim, both 59, to nurture their large garden consisting of a formal potager, a curated rose garden with more than 350 varieties, and a cutting garden of annuals, perennials and native flowers.

Evident in all parts of the process is a truly sustainable philosophy. “We grow our blooms without chemicals, and we compost waste,” Helen explains. “On the floral design side of things, we re-use vessels and avoid floral foam.”

Just as important as the flower cultivation is the food and wine grown at Riverdale. Helen and Jim tend >

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**CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE** A favourite rose, 'Honey Dijon', joins other fresh pickings; Helen cuts blooms in the rose garden; Jim and Helen in the studio, with bark curls gathered for a dried flower installation; autumn beauties include zinnias, hydrangeas, roses, cosmos, strawflower, scabiosa, medlars and Beurre Bosc pears; looking north-west from the cutting garden across to the potting table; a peek into the winery as vintage draws to a close. **FACING PAGE** Sunrise over the pinot noir vineyard.





**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT** Murray Grey cattle grazing; Helen maintains a constant supply of her dried flowers, ready to use in arrangements and installations; salvias and roses border the cottage garden at Riverdale 1898; Helen puts the finishing touches to an autumn arrangement in her studio; the eastern aspect of the main house at Riverdale; French lavender (*Lavandula dentata*) is wonderful fresh or dried. **FACING PAGE** Mallee enjoys the views and fresh air during an afternoon walk with devoted owners Jim and Helen.

a vineyard of pinot noir grapes which produces about two barrels each year. “We put in the small pinot vineyard in 2016 as a passion project, and we love to gather family and friends at harvest time,” Helen says.

Their large kitchen garden includes a wide range of seasonal vegetables, including black-flowered broad beans, heirloom beetroot, artichokes and all sorts of herbs. A flourishing orchard also provides a succession of citrus, stone fruit, pears, quinces and berries. “Jim makes jams and is a keen preserver, and I love to bake with homegrown fruits,” Helen says. “I also adore designing with fruit, foliage and flowers from the orchard.”

With their energetic golden retriever, Mallee, by their side, they also run about 40 head of Murray Grey cattle, and keep chickens and bees. There are seven beehives, kept for pollination, honey production and the pure enjoyment of having bees around. “Our garden is alive with their happy buzz,” Helen says.

“For as long as I can remember, I have hankered for a life on the land; longing to experience rural life,” she adds. “It took a few moves, much searching, and a lot of patience until we finally found Riverdale. There was no grand

vision, except to have a rural property with a country garden to enjoy with our two growing children.”

It may have been a humble vision, but it’s one they have amply achieved, building a rich country life that enables them to pursue their creative passions and keeps them connected to the land. And those children – Alistair, an engineer and management consultant based in Sydney with his wife, Natalie, and four-month-old son Callum, and 28-year-old Abbey, a secondary-school teacher and floral designer living in Bunbury – return to their childhood home as often as their busy schedules allow.

It’s a life that Helen and Jim are now opening up to visitors, with the launch of their guest accommodation, Riverdale 1898, which is the original cottage on the property. And it’s a life that Helen has documented in her new book, *Garden Gathered: Floral design & rural life at Riverdale Farm* (The Flower Press).

Most of all, though, it’s a life that the couple spent a long time dreaming about, worked hard to create, and are now enjoying to its fullest. *For more information, visit [riverdalefarm.com.au](http://riverdalefarm.com.au) To buy Helen’s book, visit [theflowerpress.com.au](http://theflowerpress.com.au)*

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