

For flower power, going fake never looked so real

A new generation of designers has banished memories of cheap artificial blooms with an elegant approach, writes Olivia Lidbury

Warming to the idea of dried flowers? They were so 2020. This year it's all about trompe l'oeil blooms. "I would normally be opposed to fake flowers," says Amanda Cutter Brooks, author and owner of Cutter Brooks (cutterbrooks.com), a beautiful Cotswolds boutique selling impeccably curated homewares. "But these just don't have that feeling, because they are exquisitely crafted and assembled."

Brooks is referring to the playful paper creations by The Green Vase, which she sources from New York. Her shop sold out of their jaunty foxgloves (£170) and charming hollyhock stems (£180) in the run-up to Christmas. "They just light up a room and bring the inside in. I placed a giant order and they have been hugely popular. I think our customers love them for the same reason I do – they last forever and don't require any care."

For flower lovers, that faux stems – be they made of paper, silk or plastic – are everlasting has always been outweighed by the fact they've never looked or felt convincing enough.

The assumption is that they are too stiff, too bright, too plasticky, too... naff. But not any more. "Faux flowers had a bad reputation for so many years, but the production process has changed and so have people's tastes," says designer Abigail Ahern (abigailahern.com), the industry leader where artificial greenery is concerned.

When the fresh flower market positively wilted during the first lockdown, paper artist Karen Hsu, founder of Pom Pom Factory (pompomfactory.com) in east London experienced a surge of orders for her crêpe paper peony bouquets. While the bulk of her work



▲ Wild Hive offers online workshops to help people craft their own paper flowers

day-to-day had involved creating fantastical installations for restaurants and retailers in London, overnight she was writing accompanying notecards for small posies that read "thinking of you, hope to see you soon" and fielding requests from funeral parlours. The biodegradable papers she uses travel well (a wedding bouquet sent all the way to Singapore arrived unscathed) and offer infinite styling possibilities. "You can reuse them as a table display or rearrange them with other seasonal foliage; they have such a lifespan."

Ahern can barely keep up with the demand. "In lockdown, there was a huge spike in all things accessories, including botanicals. Everyone wants a quick fix to enliven dining tables and consoles; it's like buying a lipstick. A stem of trailing eucalyptus cheers you up." A pioneer in making faux stems look naturalistic, her collection has



'They are everlasting. It's a way to move away from constantly buying fresh flowers'

▲ Oka's faux hydrangea, hops and peony bunch is available from £95

'Faux flowers had a bad reputation for so many years, but the production process has changed'

become the accidental success story of her business since she debuted her range eight years ago.

"Ours are hand-painted, which is why they are slightly more expensive, and I was the only one asking the factories to make them with brown edges, with more wilt, more droop. Previously, you just wouldn't send someone faux flowers, but now they're elevated and a really cool present."

Luxury home accessories brand Oka (oka.com) reports that its faux hydrangea stems, in blue, green and white variants, were its bestsellers in the faux department last year, and that customers are increasingly turning to its faux flower bunches. These are pre-arranged and pre-tied, so all you need to worry about is locating a vase. Stems can be swapped in and out as a nod to the changing seasons, but its creative director, Sue Jones, simply enjoys her favourite flowers all year round. And after increased demand, e-tailer Cox & Cox (coxandcox.co.uk) will add more than 30 new styles of faux plants, flowers and dried grasses to its offering this year.

Interior stylist Emily Rickard (@emilyrickardstylist) has long turned to faux stems from the likes of Ahern and Dowling & Reynolds for her shoots that might require a peony in the middle of January. She suggests treating them as though they are the real deal: "Think about adding different styles and varying heights together in the same vase or vessel, maybe even mixing some dried ones in too. If you let yourself get creative with them, they can look lovely."

One brand that has mastered the art of styling is Fox Flowers (foxflowers.co.uk), whose dramatic arrangements of faux blooms appear to have been plucked from the canvas of an Old Masters painting. Owner Anthony Smith explains how: "We started out with a few arrangements, thinking that would inspire people to buy individual stems, but we were proved wrong – the styled bouquets are incredibly popular."

That its bouquets range from £135 to almost £1,000 isn't putting clients off. In fact, many are sold out and January is proving busier than the pre-Christmas rush. Smith's wife and business partner,



▲ Abigail Ahern's pampas grass, below, and The Green Vase range of paper flowers, above, available from Cutter Brooks



Laura, is a self-taught florist who designs the compositions herself.

Bouquets are then made up to order in their workshop. Their most popular is Fruit Salad, a fun, vivid blend of faux dahlias and chrysanthemum mixed with (real) dried thistle stems, costing £299, vase included. "A lot of the elements of faux are produced in plastic, which is obviously a swear word these days," says Smith. "But they are everlasting and feel incredibly real. It's a

considered way to move away from constantly buying fresh flowers, which does take a lot of land and farming and water to produce. Yes, it's pricey, but in my opinion, worth the investment."

Twig Hutchinson (@minfordjournal), a stylist who creates imagery for Matches Fashion and Plain English kitchens, can't get a bespoke display of The Green Vase flowers (as stocked by Cutter Brooks) that she saw last year out of her head. Flanking the entrance to "haute ceramicist" Astier de Villatte in Paris, she recalls "the grandest, most extraordinary display of paper flowers that I've ever seen". "But they are quite expensive," she says. "I found a seller on Etsy based in Ukraine who makes the most beautiful crêpe poppies – they would look beautiful separated out into little bud vases". Hutchinson's secret seller? Look up SemperFlorensDesign (no spaces) on Etsy.com and you'll never struggle for a birthday gift again.

Or, you could have a go at crafting your own. Bee Watson, a botanical artist and founder of Devon-based Wild Hive (wildhive.co.uk), hosts paper-flower-making workshops online. Over the course of two and a half hours, she coaches a Zoom group of 12 participants through the elements of a ranunculus or primrose. For £25, pupils are sent all the materials in the post. "A lot of people are crafting for their mental health. Some use it as a break from home-schooling or working from home and it's their down-time activity," she says.

She releases courses every six weeks and jokes how they've become as coveted as a Glastonbury ticket: 198 slots for January were booked within 12 hours. Private workshops are available for small groups and popular with companies seeking virtual team-building events. In this scenario, the peony is the most requested tutorial. "I think because they're so short-lived in real life," says Watson. For the less tech-savvy or those who simply want to craft under their own steam, she has created monthly subscription kits.

With local florists largely closed and no sign of spring just yet, a pop of colour inspired by nature – and one set to endure more than a fortnight – will bring a little welcome joy.

► Cutter Brooks in the Cotswolds stocks The Green Vase collection from New York



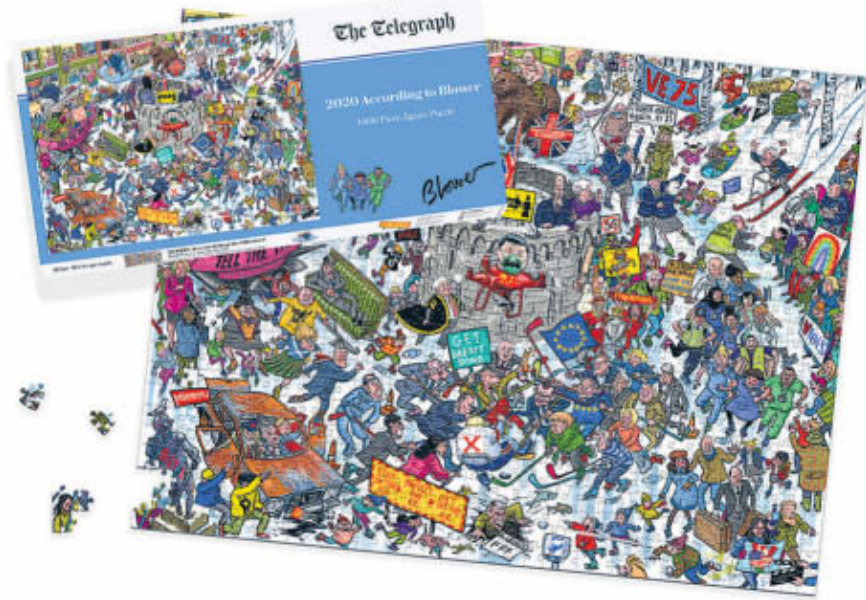
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Blower

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To say that 2020 has been an unprecedented period for all of us probably qualifies as the understatement of the year.

From Brexit to Harry and Meghan, from statue-felling to Covid, we have simply never seen a year like it.

To mark such a significant time, while keeping some whimsy and light-heartedness in our lives, the cartoonist Blower has created an incredible 1,000-

piece jigsaw, reviewing the year for you to piece together (while also piecing together how all these dramatic events could possibly have occurred in just 12 months). The puzzle comes with a 100 per cent natural cloth bag in which to keep all the pieces safe.

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