

FLOWER TALK WITH CAROLYNE ROEHM

Coming full circle, designer and author Carlyne Roehm forges a career in what she loved most as a child—flowers and her grandmother's garden

Article by Lori Rotenberk

Although it was the title of designer Carlyne Roehm's first book, "A Passion For Flowers" is perhaps the most telling ingredient of how this former clothing designer altered her career, bringing her visual gifts to the garden and interior design.

Nowhere is this more evident than on the 59-acre grounds of Roehm's Connecticut estate, Weatherstone, where the elegantly tall designer headquarters her rapidly growing business as author, designer, and lifestyle expert. Surrounded by "an uncountable" number of small plots where exquisite vegetable, cutting, herb, stream and perennial gardens flourish, Roehm, 48, has set up shop in a small studio that she describes as overflowing with fresh floral and shrub cuttings.

For now, it is her home until she rebuilds historic Weatherstone (built in 1753) which was gutted by fire last January. The project, though initially heartbreaking, is allowing Roehm a sweeping change at interior design. It also opens the door to work closely with an architect, stretching her visual talent to something more permanent.

It is in the French-doored and light-filled studio, however, that Roehm, too, is rebuilding her life. In the past few years, she has written the text and photographed the floral arrangements for her four successful books. The most recent three, *Summer Notebook*, *Fall Notebook*, and the newly published *Winter Notebook*, explore the pleasures of the season, from gardening tips, and full-color instructions for stunning floral arrangements to recipes for sumptuous meals from the vegetable



garden.

To better understand Roehm's style, it is important to look at her past—one that began in rural Missouri. "I have loved flowers and design since I was a child. I was an only child and I spent much of my time playing alone in my grandmother's garden," Roehm says. "I would make these corsages from her flowers, selling them to my grandmother for a nickel."

Even then her eye for the beauty of roses, peonies, lilac, sweet peas, pansies and lily-of-the-valley (all which remain among her favorite flowers) was keen. So was her sense for clothing. After all, Roehm would don gowns sent by relatives for dressups and her first purchase as a child was a tiara from a Sears catalogue. "My design sense comes from my grandmother,"

Roehm explains. "Both of my parents were in education, very left-brain people into books and reading, not visual at all. Thankfully, they realized when I was young that I was a good art student and they pushed me in that direction."

The country remained a major inspiration upon graduation from St. Louis' Washington University and the immediate move to New York beginning her career in fashion as a design assistant to Oscar de la Renta. After a brief marriage to financier Henry Kravis and a clothing line which folded (Kravis financed the Roehm clothing line), the course of Roehm's life drastically changed, bringing her around the things she most cherished. Which, she says, brings her back to the garden. "When you lose your marriage and your business at the same time it's devastating," Roehm says. "But in the end it made me think

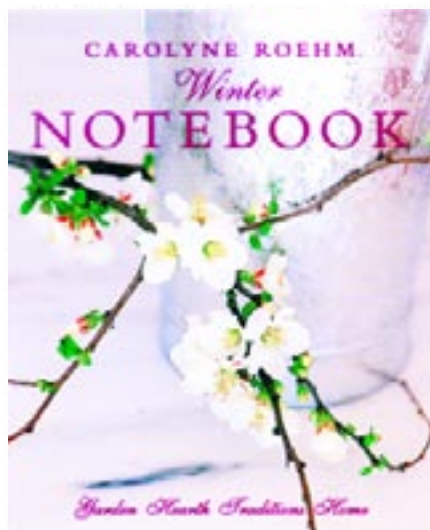
■ Above Carlyne Roehm in her greenhouse at her Weatherstone estate with one of her many dogs (a Cairn terrier). Opposite page Roehm getting her hands dirty among some of her favorite flowers.



Winter Preparations For Your Spring Garden

With her "Winter Notebook" out in bookstores, Carolyn Roehm gives tips on how gardening can become a year-round pursuit.

1. Clean terra cotta pots and store away from freezing temperatures.
2. Clean garden tools with steel wool and oil with linseed to prevent rust.
3. Check perennials for heaving and mulch heaved roots with compost. Do not stomp on roots to push them back into the soil.
4. Send out all power equipment for servicing.
5. Check indoor plants for white fly or aphid infestation.
6. Prune fruit trees in February or before the first bud break.
7. Scan gardening catalogues and send in orders. Be sure to order new introductions in early winter before they run out.
8. Check stored tubers, bulbs, and corms for root damage. Burn or discard those with disease.
9. After the first frost, wrap tender evergreens such as boxwood and yew with burlap. Check wrappings periodically throughout the winter for wind damage.
10. Inventory all gardening supplies (including tools). Replace or repair tools and stock up on potting soil, pesticides, and fertilizer.



about what it is I love to do most and I've found that it's being around nature, around flowers. I need the sense of country like I had in Missouri where we were into the rhythms of the seasons. The season when they slaughtered the hogs, took honey for the bees, when they picked vegetables from the garden. We were even seasonal in what we ate."

Following her divorce, Roehm, always visually ensconced in 18th Century Europe, left for Oxford University to study Shakespearean

tragedy. With that completed, she moved to Paris where she bought an apartment and became an apprentice of the famous florist, Henri Moulie. "There was always an influence of French style in what I did," Roehm explains "But what I learned from Henri was care of the flowers, how to make them last longer. What the French use in their flower arranging is so different and that is what sets my arrangements apart. You'll find berries, for instance, blended with poppies and roses."

Nature's constant change, the variety and beauty of the seasons, were the impetus for the books that would follow *A Passion For Flowers*. These handy notebooks, as she calls them, would also be what would set her far apart from the growing number of garden and design writers nationally. In both her former *Summer Notebook* and *Fall Notebook*, and now her *Winter Notebook*, (spring will soon follow) Roehm describes for readers how seasonal bounty can, through hands-on instruction, be used in every area of the home, from the kitchen to the garden. What better time to plant blankets of mums and ornamental kale. She's left wide spaces in the margins for readers to make notations and jot ideas of their own.

"I see the notebooks as workbooks," Roehm says. "In them a person can store news clippings on seasonal gardening or on recipes. They can cut pictures out of magazines on a garden design and have some place to store them." The method is not unlike how Roehm herself keeps track of new ideas and old favorites. And the notebooks, in turn, will likely be a basis for a television program "only in the early discussion stage," Roehm says. Is there room for another Martha Stewart in the marketplace? Roehm thinks so.

There's no set schedule for Roehm to have her pilot completed. Don't count on this season. Roehm, you see, is perfectly happy right now. "Walks in the garden make me happy. It's what I want to do right now. Cultivate it, walk through it with the dogs. Nature is an amazing thing. A garden is a delight. A single flower is an amazing thing. I was recently looking at a Parrot tulip. The more I looked at it the more amazing it became. Who can resist a garden peony or a rose? If there is such a person, I don't want to know them. And who can resist a puppy or a child, it is all the same kind of wonder."

With such a passion for flowers, how does Roehm survive the cold of winter? "Never a day goes by that I don't walk through the gardens," Roehm says. "I survive it by looking forward to March and then April, when I'm out there scratching under what is left of the snow to see the first shoots coming up."