

# NATURAL ARTISTRY

A VIRGINIA-BASED ARTIST REDIRECTS HER CREATIVE FOCUS AFTER A MEDICAL SCARE, TRADING HER ARDUOUS WORK INDOORS FOR MYRIAD OUTDOOR MUSES.

BY Ashley Shaw | PHOTOGRAPHY BY Marcy Black Simpson





While recovering from surgery for ovarian cancer, Anne Blackwell Thompson happened upon a magazine advertisement for patio furniture featuring Oscar de la Renta and his wife, Annette. The furnishings were fine and the exotic setting was spectacular, but what mesmerized Anne was the artwork in the background.

"Behind [the couple] were these gargantuan pressed botanicals. I fell in love with them," says Anne, who started Blackwell Botanicals in 2010 as a means of channeling her artistic instincts into a newfound passion for preserved flora.

For years, Anne worked as a historical decorative painter. Exciting business opportunities led the longtime Richmond, Virginia, resident all over the country; however, she says, "It's backbreaking work." With plenty of time for reflection as she recuperated from several surgeries, Anne questioned her vocation: "Do I really want to

go back to that? Is it feeding my soul?"

A lifelong gardener and outdoors enthusiast, Anne shifted her gaze from scaffolding and floors to Mother Nature. She now spends nearly every sunny day, March through October, harvesting flowers and foliage that she dries and then transforms into one-of-a-kind works of art.

Whether mountainside ferns, water lilies, or single blades of grass, Anne carefully places her foraged finds into one of more than 100 professional plant presses she has accumulated. She dissects her fresh-picked treasures before pressing them to sustain the plants' tiniest, distinctive details. "There's no one way to [press] all these different plants," she says, comparing her preservation process to completing a puzzle, as leaves, petals, and stems all vary in thickness, shape, and size.

It wasn't until she traveled to Italy and apprenticed with acclaimed botanical artist Stuart Thornton that she understood the complexity of this Victorian craft. "How I handle my leaves is completely different than

how I harvest and preserve my seaweed, which is completely different than [handling] a hydrangea," says Anne.

She catalogs the pressed elements in her extensive herbarium (or plant library) along with meticulous notes regarding when and where she harvested each plant. "I remember every specimen," says Anne. It's why she prefers to sell her work directly to buyers as opposed to offering it in retail stores or large galleries. "I love for people to understand the story and to understand that what they are buying is not a print," she says. No two stylized pieces are exactly alike, and Anne's craftsmanship highlights the beauty of leafage and blooms as they acquire a patina with age.

Anne collaborates with interior designers around the nation and also completes commissioned pieces for hospitals, hotels, and other commercial spaces. Yet the projects that tug at her heartstrings involve special cuttings that kindle beloved memories for individual clients. "It's an emotional connection with that plant," she says.

Ever prepared, Anne always totes a pail filled with scissors, scalpels, and other essentials—whether traveling far from home or simply venturing into her own backyard. "On a beautiful day, there's nothing better than being out in the garden," she says. "It's good for your soul."

*For information, visit [blackwellbotanicals.com](http://blackwellbotanicals.com).*



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