

Southern Living

Fresh & Easy Spring Recipes



Sweet
Strawberry
Desserts

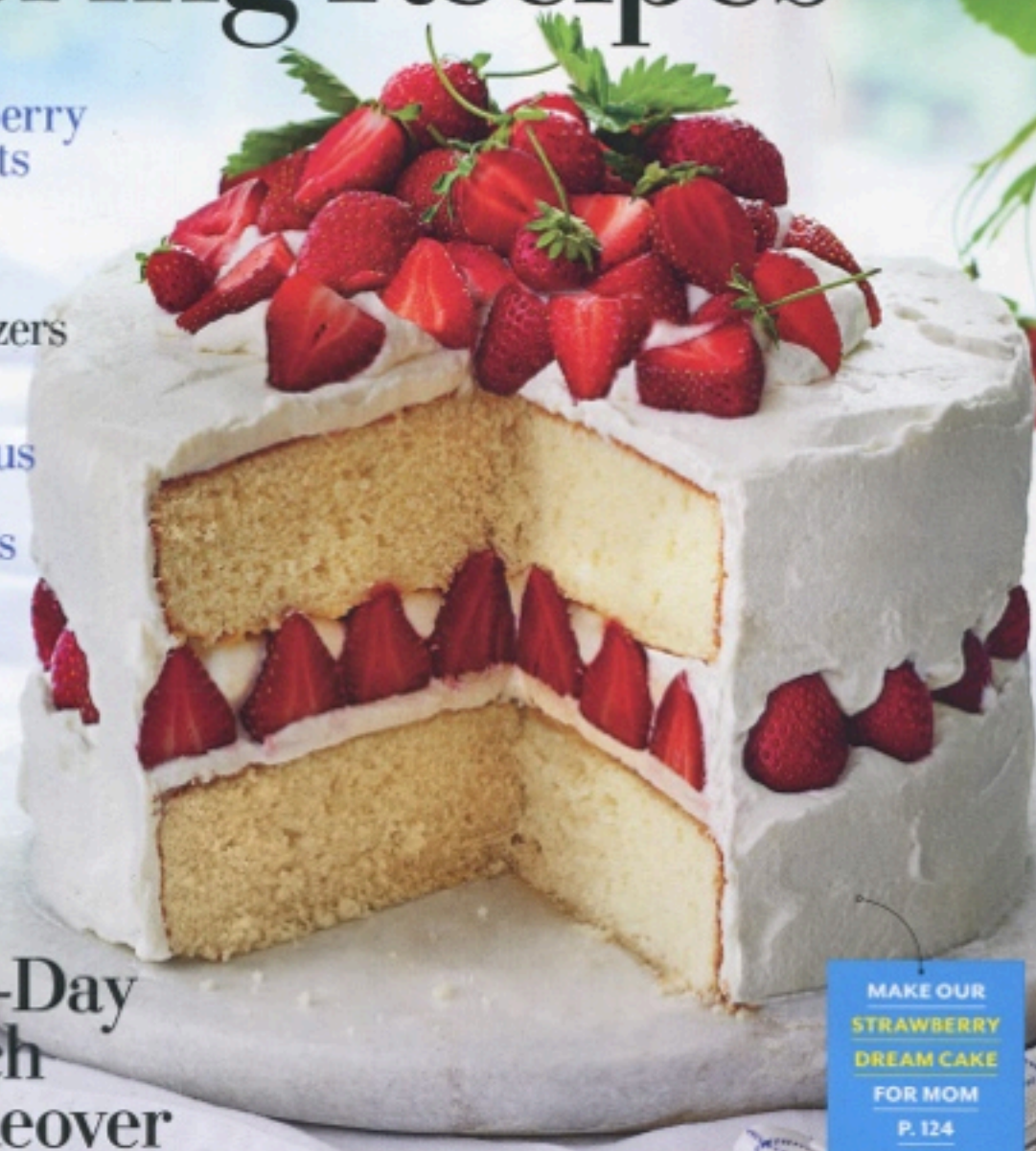
Festive
Mini
Appetizers

Fast &
Delicious
Veggie
Dinners

A
One-Day
Porch
Makeover

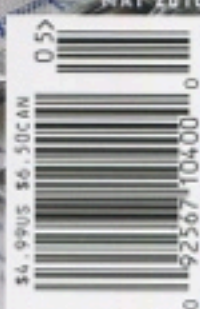
Charleston Window Boxes

Secrets to Great Southern Hair



The
South's
Prettiest
Islands

MAKE OUR
STRAWBERRY
DREAM CAKE
FOR MOM
P. 124



Southern
HOME+GARDEN

EXPERT TIPS FOR A BEAUTIFUL HOME—INSIDE AND OUT

▶ **A MINI GARDEN**

Designer **Debbie Kaminski** mixes fern, orange calibrachoa, red bromeliad, and 'Mona Lavender' plectranthus to create these impressive layers of bright color.



Who's Behind the Window Boxes of Charleston?

A secret sisterhood of designers adds magnificent vibrance to the face of the Holy City



▲ SWEEPING VINES

Jen Stringer Obi designed this stop-and-stare sight. A trio of boxes filled with white caladiums, red ti plants, and dramatic swags of creeping Jenny and ivy enlivens the facade of this historic home.

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, is home to a secret sorority, but if you've ever strolled along the streets of the Holy City's historic district, you've seen evidence of its existence. Window boxes—lush mini-gardens brimming with bright, bountiful blooms—are as iconic to the city as its side porches and steeples. The invisible, behind-the-scenes hands responsible for beautifying these boxes belong to designers like Debbie Kaminski, Jen Stringer Obi, Kelly Megeath, Kelli Shaw, and Tracee Lund. Here, we get a glimpse inside their secret circle.



▲ Charleston's window box ladies enjoy a rare moment relaxing together. From left to right: Jen Stringer Obi, Debbie Kaminski, Tracee Lund, Kelly Megeath, and Kelli Shaw

Spring Homecoming

Every spring, thousands of tourists arrive in Charleston to eat the food, soak up its culture, and walk the historic streets. Proud homeowners welcome visitors by putting their best botanical feet forward. In this city of interior courtyard gardens and traditional architecture that often doesn't allow for or include front yards, window boxes gorgeously gussy up a home's exterior facade. "I think people in Charleston have a responsibility to do these window boxes, because that's part of what gives our city its special charm," says Kaminski. It's impossible to imagine Charleston's candy-colored, shuttered homes without these floral flourishes.

The Garden Sisterhood

Each of these women runs her own business. Their

backgrounds are different—some landscape architecture, some horticulture, and one former marine biologist. What they have in common is their dedication to putting what Shaw calls “the sparkles, the eyelashes” on the face of the city of Charleston. The magic of this group is that it is a group. “The five of us all have different styles, and everyone has something different to offer,” says Obi. Whether clients are clamoring for Shaw’s bold, tropical designs or Kaminski’s asymmetrical work, the range of creative offerings from the ladies not only beautifies the city but also eliminates what could easily be a competitive atmosphere. “It’s a really awesome community of ladies that we have here; we’re genuinely happy to see each other and catch up at the nurseries,” says Kaminski. Shaw agrees: “We’re friends. We have a fairly open relationship, which is pretty amazing because we should be in competition. But we’re this sisterhood.” It’s a sisterhood of garden gals dedicated to the “beautification of the city, creating things for people to enjoy,” as Lund puts it.

Creative License

Window boxes may be a Charleston tradition, but the ladies don’t let them stay static—the women innovate. “The challenge is to reinvent your creations season after season,” says Shaw. And each

woman has her own unique approach. Kaminski starts a project by locating what she charmingly terms a “yum yum” plant—some of her favorites are succulents and bromeliads. “I’ll use it as a point of reference and design around that.” Lund enjoys the horticultural challenges: “I really tap into my creative side, and also my science

background, which I enjoy.” Some clients naturally give direction, but they often set the ladies loose to let their creative skills really shine. As Megeath explains, “If they don’t give me a preference, I usually go for bold, strong colors—you know, window boxes that really go BAM.”

Close Encounters

Their jobs may sound glamorous, but it’s not all blooms and ladies lunching. Ask any one of them and she’ll tell you that although she loves her job, it takes a



TROPICAL DRAMA

This window box by Kelli Shaw illustrates her characteristically bold and unexpected design approach. A red-centered, starlike bromeliad appears to burst from the box. And red-stemmed caladiums echo that color. In contrast, spiky maroon cordylines, deep purple heuchera, pink begonias, and trailing 'Outback Sunset' golden globes fill out this arresting showpiece.

“We’re in the best city ever to do this. We are in a city that demands window boxes. Everybody wants it, needs it, loves it.” —Kelli Shaw



▲ FLORAL EFFUSION

Designer Kelly Megeath uses yellow creeping jenny, pink mandevilla, purple calibrachoa, and red pentas for a riot of color and texture. An eclectic bunch of petite blooms evokes the feeling of an English garden—all in the space of a few feet.

tough bunch to turn inspiration into works of art, and it isn't always a smooth process. "The most challenging boxes are the ones that are on the second story—or higher," says Megeath. "We'll use an extension ladder, and

someone throws the flowers up. This often turns into a laughing situation because whoever is on the ladder gets bombarded with flowers." Other encounters are less amusing: "I've had a big old marsh rat run down my arm from a pot. That was pretty hair-raising," Lund reveals. Obi recalls one day busting a Folly Beach plant thief, who had been stealing not only from her planters but from a local condominium complex and a church: "It was a woman with a tiny shovel,

and she was digging the plants up! I spoke to her, but then she ran off." This is also a physically demanding job—hauling plants, installing boxes, and the sheer amount of walking—are all part of what Kaminski calls "garden fitness." On an average day, she can walk up to 8 miles. Lund laughs as she recalls: "I remember Kelly Megeath with two babies on her hip, changing diapers in the back of a truck loaded with a bunch of plants, shovels, and rakes. She was

TIPS FROM THE LADIES

YOU'LL WANT TO TRY THESE AT HOME

Water Your Blooms:

"Plants need to be watered before they're planted. Water them while they're in the little plastic pots. Don't put a bunch of dry plants in a box and then try to water it—the water will just roll around the dry root ball and never wet it."

—Kelli Shaw

Select Plant Buddies: "It's important to know if the box is in full sun or shade, and then select plant materials that work together. Also, there are plants that are drought tolerant and plants that want more water; you can't combine those two types in one window box."

—Kelly Megeath

Choose the Right Soil:

"Start with a well-draining potting soil—you don't want to use anything too heavy. Don't plant in topsoil, as it will rot your plants out."

—Jen Stringer Obi

Loosen Up: "When you're planting annuals, their roots are often very compacted. Loosen them up a bit. I think some people are scared that they might kill them, but the roots are tough."

—Debbie Kaminski

Take Care of the Plants—and Yourself: "Be mindful of all of the physical aspects of gardening. You need to lift carefully and bend properly."

—Tracee Lund



▲ SMALL WONDERS

This elegant box by Tracee Lund starts its season pretty and petite, but the purple salvia, sweet potato vine, and purple wishbone will fill out over the summer.

we're here to figure out how to help each other," explains Shaw.

Love Will Bloom

"I'm thankful to be a part of this. Gardens and Charleston are synonymous," enthuses Kaminski. "Designing window boxes that beautify the city is a gift. It's fun, and I get to go into some of the most historic gardens in the country," Lund remarks. "I really love it." Obi mentions another blessing: "I've finally reached a point where I

can employ a few other women, and it's great to ignite a spark for them." What she's really doing is training the next generation of window box ladies, ensuring that the city's boxes will always be in bloom. ●

just a machine of getting it done."

Teamwork Counts

Running their own businesses in a male-dominated field is a point of pride for the ladies. "Women can do this. We can be career women and have babies. It's all possible," says Lund. And they get it done together: "Jen frantically called me a while back trying to find berries. I said, 'I've got a connection.' And I made sure she got them. It's better this way;



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