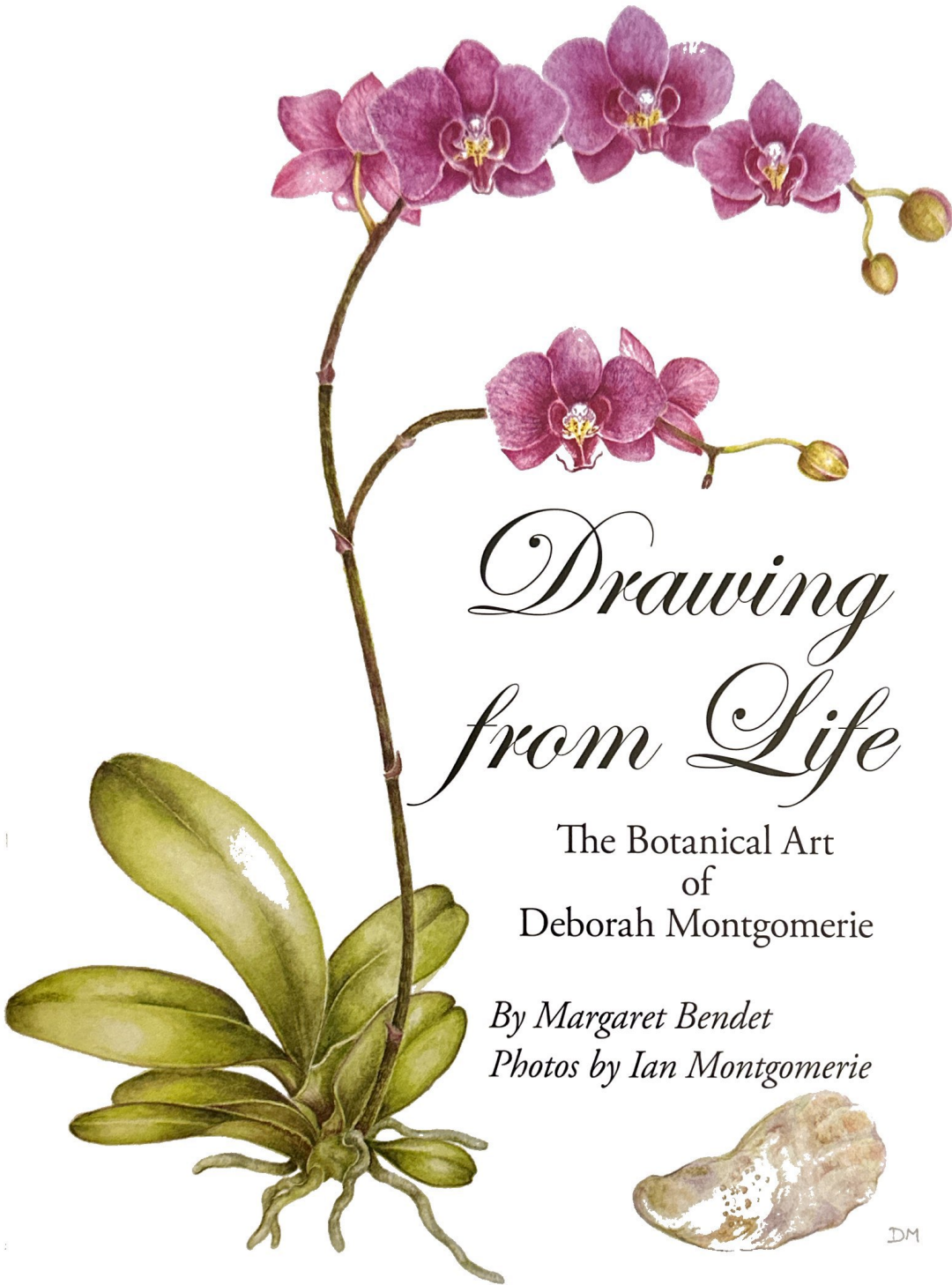


Phalaenopsis, an orchid that grows from a single stem



Drawing from Life

The Botanical Art
of
Deborah Montgomerie

By Margaret Bendet
Photos by Ian Montgomerie

“It’s one of the most calming things you can do,” Deborah Montgomerie said of depicting plants and flowers, fruits, and vegetables. “It’s such a peaceful way to spend your time.”

Do not, however, think for a minute that it’s easy.

This botanical artist focuses on each life form with precision and perspicacity—studying, measuring, peering through magnifying lenses, calibrating the angles, calculating the colors—all to the end of bringing this plant to life again on paper with graphite, ink, or watercolor.

“It takes discipline,” Montgomerie admitted. “It’s like I’m making a blueprint of the plant. The idea of botanical illustration is that you should be able to take one of my pictures into nature and identify the plants you see from what I’ve drawn.”

It was ever thus. In the Middle Ages, people put together what they called “herbals” with paintings of the plants to accompany their descriptions. These weren’t just pretty pictures to add color to the page. “They wanted people to be able to recognize the herbs,” Montgomerie said.

“These were medicines, and it was important to get them right.” When scientific expeditions set out for the new world, they would take along botanists and artists. The expeditions would bring back plants, seeds, and botanical illustrations. This was the way we learned about new plant forms.



With the advent of photography, we no longer have the same need for botanical art, but our interest in it—the joy of making these precise, exquisite images and of having them in our lives—is stronger than ever. “Botanical art has never been so popular,” Montgomery said. “For a long time, it was seen as a Victorian art form”—as something stodgy—“but now there are so many young people who want to go into the jungle or onto a mountain-top someplace so they can make paintings of plants. They’re called plant hunters.”

Montgomery has created the ideal art studio on the second floor of the home where she and her husband live in Freeland. “I saw this room,” she said, “and I knew this was the house.” It has strong natural light, banks of bookshelves,

Deborah Montgomery at the drawing board





Heirloom apples

framed color charts, drafting tables, budding orchids, dried seed pods, and baskets of anomalies: ladder-like parts of a cacti, birds' nests, the gnarled root system from what must have been an enormous parsley plant. "I'll never run out of projects," the artist said. Given that one 24-inch x 36-inch illustration of three plants took her three months to complete, she is clearly right about this.

Montmerie, who was born in England, has been a professional artist all her adult life. She trained as a textile designer and then found work as a technical illustrator in a

company that made helicopters. A career in the aerospace industry led Montmerie to such far-flung places as Nova Scotia and Brazil before she settled on Whidbey Island. Along the way, she contracted pneumonia. There was no room for her in the local hospital, so she had to pay careful attention to her own recovery. This was how she discovered the rejuvenation that comes from creating pictures of plants. She's never looked back.

In 2012 Montmerie embarked on a three-year distance learning course with the Society of Botanical Artists in the UK, and in 2019 the

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Deborah Montgomerie's "inspiration area."

organization named her a Fellow. She's also a member of the American Society of Botanical Artists and the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators.

Montgomerie's passion lies in depicting the heirloom fruits and vegetables that proliferate on Whidbey during the growing season. "I love going to the farmers' markets here," she said. "I love talking with the people who grow these beautiful foods. I love the fact that they're doing this." One of her journal covers features heirloom tomatoes, cut open to show the seeds and juicy red flesh. Her paintings of beets, a row of local apples, and a half-finished image of a pear contain so much life in them that the fruit seems to glow on the page.




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When asked what recommendations she has for a person who—while they're not going to take a three-year art course—might like to try their hand at creating realistic pictures of plants, Montgomerie suggested visiting a farmers' market. "If you see a vegetable or a fruit you think is unusual or beautiful," she said, "pick it up. Ask the person there about it. Find out what makes it special."

Montgomerie suggests beginning with graphite pencils. "Then some

Left: Rose and rose hips, wild parsley, fireweed
Center and right: Poppy seed stems and heads

people find it easier to use pen and ink over the graphite instead of paint," she said. "Whatever you do, always use professional quality materials. It makes such a difference. You can get Micron pens, Derwent graphite, and hot-pressed watercolor paper at Casey's Crafts (at Bayview)," she said. "That's a good place to start. If you want to use paint, get good quality watercolors, such as Daniel Smith or Windsor & Newton. Most companies produce sets of dot sheets that give you a chance to try out the colors before you buy expensive tubes of paint."

And beyond this?

"Honestly," she said, "it's



practice."

Deborah Montgomerie's greeting cards, tote bags, stickers, and journals are available for sale at Bayview Garden and Museo Gallery in Langley.

Margaret Bendet, a former journalist, is editor of a number of award-winning books and author of "Learning to Eat Along the Way: A Memoir." She has taught introductory classes in memoir writing at the Senior Resources Center and in libraries on South Whidbey. She loves helping people tell their stories.

Ian Montgomerie works in his day job as an engineer. He enjoys doing photography in his spare time and can often be found at Crockett Lake Reserve taking nature photographs.

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