

The Art of Drying Flowers

The romantic renaissance of country decorating has brought with it a return of the craft of drying flowers. Whether used in bouquets, pressed flower pictures, or potpourri, or on hats, wreaths, kissing balls, shadow boxes, hearth brooms, Shaker boxes, window ornaments, door swags, or whatever, dried flowers inspire us to recreate a gentler time of beauty and elegance in our homes.

The inspiration to grow and use dried flowers is as close as the garden center or greenhouse this spring. Many of the common annuals like zinnias and marigolds are readily dried. Look for transplants of everlasting flowers. These are the ones most often used in dried-flower crafting. They almost dry themselves, they're so easy.

Some of the names of everlastings to look for include strawflower, globe amaranth, cockscomb (both crested and plumed), statice, baby's breath, money plant, Chinese lantern, and bells- of-Ireland. Plus, there are three unpronounceable Latin names and no common name: ammobium, helipterum, and xeranthemum. Take them home and give them names you can live with, like Harry or Florence. The various ornamental grasses, love-in-a-mist seed pods, blue sage (and its white-flowered variation), larkspur, and yarrow are also dried easily.

All of the above flowers and plants are air dried. This merely involves cutting them when the dew is gone, tying several stems together with string or pipe cleaner after the leaves are removed, and hanging in a cool, dry, dark, well-ventilated place. Drying time will vary; check how they feel after a week or so. When they feel crisp, take them down and store in boxes or paper bags.

Most of these can be used just as they are, but strawflowers and a few others will need wire stems to use them in bouquets. To wire, cut off the flower stem and thread a length of 20-gauge florist wire through the center. Make a 2-inch hairpin bend at the top, and gently pull it through the center of the flower. Wire the new stem with floral tape.

Preserving other garden flowers requires a drying agent. Use sand, fresh kitty litter, a white cornmeal-and-borax mixture, or, for best results, silica gel. This is commercially available and sold under several different trade names at garden centers.

Pick flowers in the middle of the day and cut stems to 1 inch long. Fill the bottom of a flat dish or cardboard box with 1 inch of the drying agent. Put in the flowers. Flat flowers like daisies or pansies are usually best placed face down. Most of the flowers with many petals like zinnias, marigolds, calendulas, mums, and aster do better facing up. Experimenting is the only solution. Spikes of flowers like snapdragons and scarlet sage are placed horizontally. Now, carefully add more drying agent until the flowers are completely covered. The drying time varies, but check after several days. Dry petals will feel like paper. Store in boxes with a little silica gel to absorb moisture in the air. If using in arrangements, wire the stems just like the strawflowers.

The drying agent process can be speeded up with the microwave oven. Prepare a few flowers at a time in a small dish. Put this in the microwave along with a cup of water. "Cook" on medium for 10 seconds to 3 minutes, depending on the thickness of the flower. Again, you must experiment with timing because conditions are so variable. After microwaving, allow to cool in the drying agent for a few hours up to a day or so.

Flowers with flat faces like pansies, petunias, violas, and daisies are good to press and use for decorating stationery, bookmarks, or place mats or for making pictures. Simply place 3 flowers between sheets of blotting paper and put in a flower press or weight down with bricks or books. Check them after a week. Fern fronds are also

good for pressing.

Potpourris are made by drying petals on screens or trays in a dehydrator, gas oven with a pilot light, or electric oven on the lowest setting. Rose petals make up the bulk of the mixture, with other flowers, herbs, spices, and citrus peels adding additional fragrance and color. To enhance the scent, add 10 drops or so of an essential oil and 3 tablespoons of ground orris root as a fixative to each quart of dried material.

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There are many summer flowering annuals which are excellent for drying. Marigold, salvia, cosmos, zinnia, coreopsis and gloriosa daisy are among the most popular, though ageratum, dahlia, calendula, chrysanthemum, dianthus, aster and daisies also make fine dried specimens.

Drying flowers is such a rewarding experience because it is easy to do, the flowers usually dry remarkably well, and they last for many years. Flowers can be preserved in several different ways, by hanging, pressing or with various drying agents.

If you would like to dry your own bouquets, cut the blossoms when their color is at its peak. Remove the leaves, then try one of the following methods:

HANGING - Air-drying or hanging is the easier and best method for preserving many flowers. As a general rule, flowers need only to have the leaves removed and to be hung upside down in a warm, dry, dark place until the moisture content is evaporated. An attic, closet or pantry is a good place to hang flowers for drying.

PRESSING - Easy and quick, though the contour is lost and flowers are flat. For pressing use unglazed paper, such as newsprint or an old telephone book. Place the flowers so that they do not overlap between several thicknesses of the paper. Weigh down with a heavy object. The time required for drying can be anywhere from two to four weeks.

DRYING AGENTS - Flowers can be dried by burying them in materials such as sand and borax or corn meal and borax. These materials are successful for certain flowers, but undependable for others.

More recently, a drying agent called silica gel has been used. This compound has the capacity to absorb large quantities of moisture and can quickly dehydrate cut flowers. Flowers, minus leaves are buried in the gel in a closed container and left for about a week. Silica gel can be used over and over by redrying the gel in a warm oven.

Silica gel should be available at florist or hobby shops.

MICROWAVE OVEN - The versatile oven, which has proven itself so useful to the chef, also has the capacity of drying your favorite flowers. Microwave drying is quick and relatively simple, but takes more space to discuss than this column allows. If you'd like more information on this method of floral preservation, drop me a note at 203 West Nueva, Room 310, San Antonio, Texas 78207. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope so I can send you this information.

Whichever method you choose, the use of dried flowers for "permanent" arrangements can be colorful and rewarding, and surprisingly inexpensive.

After you've dried your flowers, put a strand of No. 2 florist's wire through each flower's head, securing the wire by bending it into a hood at the flower-head end. The final step is to wrap all wire with green floral tape and,

presto, you're ready to be creative. From Aggie Horticulture: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu>