

You can give flowers life after death

Summer's the time to gather flowers to preserve for use in winter crafts.

Michigan State University horticulturist Leo Taylor suggests cutting flowers just before they reach the fully opened stage, not when they are beginning to fade. Cut flowers on a warm, sunny day. Flower surfaces will be fairly dry then, and mold and mildew aren't likely to be a big problem.

Process flowers immediately after cutting. Holding flowers in water for even 24 hours increases surface moisture and causes damage to delicate petals.

Always process more material than you think you'll need, Taylor advises. This will make up for shrinkage, loss due to breakage and mold, and poor estimating.

The two major ways to preserve

flowers are pressing and drying. The method you use is determined by the flowers you want to work with and the way you want to use them.

To press flowers for decorative plaques, groupings of miniatures and other craft items, place generally flat blossoms like pansies between sheets of newspaper. Arrange the petals in a natural position at that time or a few hours later, after the flowers have become limp. Place the newspaper sheets in a book or a stack of magazines in a warm, dry place. Apply more pressure by piling more books or magazines on top.

Change the newspapers daily during the week it will take the flowers to dry. If the weather is humid, change them more frequently, Taylor advises. Changing the newspapers removes

moisture from the flowers quickly and prevents mold from growing.

Flowers are ready to be stored for later use when they are crisp and perfectly dry.

This same process can be used to press leaves, Taylor notes. For three-dimensional craft items, select one of the three basic drying methods: hanging upside-down, sand or borax, and silica gel.

Flowers that dry well when hung upside-down in a warm, dark place with good air circulation include astilbe, blue thimble flower, calendula, cattail, Chinese lantern, cockscomb, dock, dusty miller, gaillardia, globe amaranth, globe thistle, gold-eroad, larkspur, lavender, lemon verbena, marigold, mallin, okra, plume grass, Queen Ann's lace, sage, straw flowers, tansy and yarrow.

To dry by this method, strip all the foliage from the flower stems. Tie

small flowers in bunches, making sure that the flower heads do not touch each other. Fasten the bunches of small flowers and individual large flowers to wires or cords about six inches apart. Flowers should dry in two to three weeks.

Baby's breath and statice can be air-dried standing upright in a jar, Taylor notes.

Asters, balsam, bleeding heart, candytuft, canterbury bells, pink, mums, colums leaves, columbines, coral bells, cornflowers, cosmos, daffodils, dahlias, delphiniums, dandelions, daylilies, geraniums, gladiol, gloriosa daisy, iris, lily, lilac, lily of the valley, lupine, painted daisy, pansy, peony, rose, snapdragon, stock, tulip, and zinnia do well when dried by the sand or borax method. They will not hang dry.

Use clean, sharp sand. Make sure it is dry, Taylor cautions—damp sand will spot and spoil the flowers. You

may also use borax, though it may leave a slight film on the blossoms.

Place several thicknesses of newspaper in the bottom of a sturdy cardboard box and pour in about four inches of sand. Remove all the foliage from the stems and trim them to the desired length. Then stand the flowers upside-down on the sand. Make sure their heads don't touch. Spike-shaped flowers (like coral bells or bleeding hearts) and pyramidal flowers (like lilacs) should be laid lengthwise in the box.

Pour sand gently over the flowers. It's not necessary to cover the stems all the way, but do make sure that there is sand between all the petals and in the trumpets of flowers like daffodils.

It should take one to two weeks for most flowers to dry thoroughly in sand or borax. When they are dry, brush off the sand with a soft brush or tissue,

pack them in boxes, label and store them in a dry place.

Drying flowers with silica gel is much like drying them in sand, but Taylor says silica gel is both faster and better. Flowers dried in silica gel retain their colors better, he points out. Fragile flowers that would be damaged by sand drying can be safely dried with silica gel.

Place flowers face up in about two inches of silica gel in a container with a tight fitting top. Sprinkle silica gel over the flowers until they are covered, being sure to work the material in around all the flower parts. Then seal the container with masking tape.

The flowers should be dry in a week. Remove them carefully and blow or brush away any particles of silica gel that adhere to the flowers. To recharge the material, heat it in a 250-degree oven until the pink indicator crystal turns blue.

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