

DRYING FLOWERS

HAVE YOU EVER WISHED you could enjoy the beauty of summer flowers year-round? You can, if you preserve garden flowers now while they're at their peak of bloom. Flowers that are easy to preserve include baby's breath, celosia, yarrow, statice, globe amaranth, strawflowers, xeranthemum, and artemisia. But because flowers and plant parts respond differently to drying and preserving methods, you may need to experiment for best results.

The first rule is to start with top quality plants. Choose fresh, unwilted, undamaged flowers and foliage. Collect plant materials on a warm, sunny day after the dew has dried. Dampness encourages mould and slows the drying process. Try to cut flowers just before they are fully opened. And always gather more material than you think you'll need!

Air drying is the easiest method of drying flowers, and is generally the best method to use for small flowers in clusters such as baby's breath, as well as dock, goldenrod, grasses, sedges, and cattails. Simply strip the foliage from the stems, tie them in small bunches and hang them upside down for several weeks in a warm, dry place with good air circulation, such as an attic or old barn. Flowers such as hydrangea and yarrow dry best when placed upright in a jar filled with one-half inch water that is then allowed to evaporate.

Another traditional method to preserve summer flowers is to press them between layers of paper towels or waxed paper (best for fine or delicate flowers) between heavy books or in a wooden flower press. Select only perfect specimens, and keep in mind that, while orange and yellow blossoms will retain their vivid colour, most blues, purples, and pinks will fade, and reds may turn a muddy brown. Leave your flowers in the press for four to six weeks.

To dry zinnias, roses, and other flowers with thick heads, use a drying agent such as borax, white cornmeal, or silica gel (available at crafts shops). These materials draw the moisture out of plant tissues while still retaining flower colour. Spread the drying agent about an inch thick in the bottom of an airtight container. Select blooms of similar size and type, and remove the foliage and most of the stem. Place the blooms on top of the layer, and cover completely with more drying agent. Seal the container, and place in a cool, dark place. In about a week the flower petals will be dry and crisp. Gently pour off the agent, and remove the dried flowers.

To preserve woody stems of leaves and fruit, cut the ends and place the bottom four to five inches of basal stem in a glycerine mixture until the plant has a glossy appearance and a leathery feel to all its leaves. To make the mixture, combine two parts water with one part glycerine (available at most drug stores), and blend thoroughly.

If you want instant results, you can microwave the flowers with silica gel in an oven-proof or glass container. Preheat one inch of the silica gel on high for one minute or until crystals turn blue. Place a flower on the warm crystals, and cover completely with silica gel. Cook for one to three minutes, then let stand for up to 25 minutes. Standing time will vary depending on flower type. Alternatively, Lee Valley Tools sells a specially designed flower press for use with the microwave.