

# Drying flowers

GARDENERS KNOW ALL TOO WELL that the beautiful flower gardens in midsummer will be only a memory by later fall. But you can retain a little of the beauty by drying some of the flowers. And it's not hard to do. The easiest way to dry flowers is by air drying. The first step is to choose a place that is dry and dark, with good air circulation. An attic is usually good, but a basement may be too damp. Old barns, if you're lucky to have one or from a nearby neighbor, often work well.

Harvest before the flowers are fully open, and strip the foliage from the stems. Tie small flowers in bunches so that their flower heads do not touch, then hang upside down. Most will dry in two to three weeks. Many flowers, and those with many petals such as roses, can be dried in a water-absorbing, or desiccant, material. Simply place flowers, not touching, in a container such as a shoe box on a layer of such material. Then cover with more of the material, and cover the box. Materials can be purchased for this, or you can simply use corn meal.

The most popular annual for drying is probably the strawflower. They grow up to two feet tall with flowers in all shades of red, pink, and gold. The showy, stiff bracts surround and conceal the tiny flowers inside. Globe amaranth has small, globe-shaped flowers as its name indicates. They come in many bright colors including purple, pink, white, and red. These flowers dry quickly, and are long lasting.

Purple statice and sea lavender, just like the florists use, are easy to dry at home. Rat-tailed statice has 18-inch long, pencil-thin spires of tiny lilac-colored flowers. It should be cut when the flowers are fully expanded.

For warm colours — yellows, golds, and reds — grow and dry some calendula, marigolds, and celosia or cockscomb. All retain their colours when dried, but the bright and clear colours of celosia are especially good. Some celosia have plumed or feathered tops, others crested as the comb of a rooster — hence the name.

Bells of Ireland are delicate green spikes that add a subtle background to any arrangement. Pick off most of the leaves so that the bells will be more conspicuous.

Dusty miller dries to a delicate silver-white, and compliments soft pink and purple flowers. There are a couple varieties to choose from, including a very finely cut lacy form. Another white filler, commonly seen in florist arrangements, but easily grown and dried at home, is the baby's breath. There are annual and perennial forms of this plant.

For a light, airy touch add dried grasses. Just about any ornamental grass will do. Some such as the fox-tail grass (*Pennisetum*) are not hardy in the coldest areas (they need USDA zone 5 and warmer) so must be grown as annuals. Another grass-like plant, the purple-leafed Ornamental Millet Royal Majesty, has tall dark purple spikes. It is a recent All America winner and quite popular in gardens.

Dried flowers can be used in flower arrangements, bud vases, door swags, wreaths, and many other crafts. Viewing these flowers through the winter will remind you of how beautiful your garden was last year, and will be next spring. And they will remind you to order more annuals for drying next year, to replace those that fade and shrivel over time.