Dried Flower Arrangements

By Dorothy Kuder Smith

Do you remember Grandmother's winter bouquet stuck in a fancy vase on the upright piano, a lovely fringed scarf spread out under all? The bouquet, collected by Grandmother herself, usually consisted of bittersweet, painted milkweed pods, and pampas grass.

Like other Early Americans, Grandmother used dried flowers to conceal odors of cooking and poor plumbing. She prepared jars of potpourri (dried flower petals mixed with spices) and placed them about the house to give off fragrance when the lids were lifted.

Since our ancestors' time we have discovered untold varieties of plant materials, not only for potpourri and winter bouquets, but for various designs for year-round enjoyment and use.

Today entire families are becoming increasingly interested in growing and collecting plant material for preserving and designing, not only for home decoration, but for profit.

You need only develop a "seeing eye" to spot the many materials nature offers. Besides those found in your own garden, a stroll along a country road or through field and wood will reveal many blossoms, foliages, seed pods, and grasses. With a little knowledge of preserving and designing, they can be put to profitable use.

(Avoid collecting materials from parks, arboretums, and public places. Do not collect materials on the conservation list in your state, unless grown on your own property. Avoid poison ivy with its clusters of grayish berries and its bright red 3-lobed foliage in autumn).

Plant materials, when preserved, remain in good condition for years. In fact, dry garlands and wreaths of blue delphinium and lotus blossoms, in good color and form, were found in opened Egyptian tombs dating back to 1700 B.C.

Four simple methods of preserving are:

Air Drying. Strip foliage from fresh cut flowers. Tie loosely in small bundles, and hang them upside down in a warm, darkened room until dry, 1 to 2 weeks. Store in cardboard boxes. Protect from mice, which attack seeds.

Sturdy flowers, such as zinnias, marigolds, celosia, cockscomb, strawflowers, and herbs and mints dry well using this...
method. Most Williamsburg type dried arrangements are made of air-dried flowers.

- **Glycerinizing.** Smash the bottom 2 to 3 inches of stems of fresh cut magnolia and other broad-leaved evergreens, and place immediately in a solution, 4 to 5 inches deep, of 2 parts hot water to 1 to 2 parts glycerine (or anti-freeze). Add more solution as it is absorbed. Let remain 2 to 3 weeks or until leaves have become supple and golden brown.

  Glycerinize deciduous branches as oak, dogwood, and beech in mid-summer before sap stops flowing. Materials thus treated remain supple and useful for years. They are excellent alone in large arrangements, or combined with fresh flowers.

- **Pressing.** Press flowers and foliage between sheets of porous paper (newspaper or a telephone directory) weighted down. Drying may require several weeks. A quick method is to press with a warm iron until all moisture is removed.

  These methods produce a flat effect, unsuitable for arrangements, but useful for pressed flower pictures, laminated lampshades, stationery and other flat designs.

- **Burying in Silica Gel.** This is a commercial drying agent in which flowers dry quickly, retaining beautifully their form.

To make a wreath, cover a wire foundation with bulky fabric to a thickness of 1/2 inch. Then wire dried pods, cones, and fruits from field or garden to the wreath form.
and color. The most delicate flowers are best preserved this way—roses, sweet peas, daffodils and iris.

Flowers dried by this method may absorb moisture from the air, so it is advisable to use them only in the dry winter months, or in arrangements under airtight glass or clear plastic domes.

Detailed directions for using silica gel are included with its purchase. A new and very quick method consists of drying flowers with silica gel in a microwave oven.

Other drying media are fine salt-free sand or borax powder mixed half and half with white cornmeal. Lacking these, fine dry sawdust or "Kitty Litter" can be used, but results may be disappointing.

Many materials need no special attention. Merely cut strong stalks such as corn, grains, cotton, okra, dock, sumac, goldenrod, mullein, teasel, milkweed, rose hips, bittersweet, cattails, and Queen-Annes-lace and stand upright in tall containers until ready to use. These make excellent big arrangements, alone or in combinations with fresh flowers.

Seed pods—such as tulip, daffodil, poppy, martynia, wisteria, and trumpet vine—can be clipped from their stalks and spread out to dry. Magnolia pods, sweetgum balls, sycamore buttons, acorns, nuts, small gourds, and cones should also be dried thoroughly to prevent mildew. The above mentioned are excellent for binding into a dry wreath.

When collecting materials, choose only those in prime condition. To obtain desired color gradations, teasels, Queen-Annes-lace, and many pods and grasses can be bleached and made more effective by soaking for a short time in a solution of household bleach. (Approximately 1/2 cup to 1 gallon water, or stronger if necessary).

Dirty material, if not too fragile, can be washed and dried thoroughly. Clean open cones by brushing vigorously between the scales with a bottle brush or a narrow paint brush.

Plastic Spray
A coat of clear plastic from a push-button can enhances the appearance of cones, acorns, nuts, and all smooth surfaces and reduces the brittleness of baby's breath, goldenrod, and other delicate materials. Made-up designs are improved by a light spray of plastic every six months.

Whether for fun or profit, the basic information given is necessary. Details on creating the designs you wish for yourself, or for sale, are readily available.

Flower-arranging classes in Montgomery County, Mary-
land, present annually a showing of wreaths, swags, kissing balls, corsages, pressed flower pictures, and arrangements, made mostly of preserved materials. During the exhibition the students freely give information regarding creation of these items.

Almost every community sponsors such shows, workshops, and classes in flower designing in which the public is urged to participate. Libraries, arboretums, garden clubs, and garden magazines also offer valuable information.

By taking advantage of what's offered, almost everyone—including children—can master the technique and find themselves happily involved in a profitable venture.

Since many children have "nothing to do", they might become interested in collecting and preparing material as discussed above. With a piece of ground of their own, they can grow such decorative items as Indian and strawberry corn, gourds, martynia, okra pods, and kaffir corn.

There are great demands for such items in autumn, when children could establish their own roadside stands. Bundles of corn stalks, wild rose hips, bittersweet, and other beauties from the roadside are great for attracting customers.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, where interest is high in this field, many people are selling their products to friends and associates, either from their homes or where they work. Some find outlets through gift shops and department stores. Many have developed a profitable business as professional decorators.

Garden centers, supermarkets and department stores, as a service to customers, may be willing to set up an area for sale of your products.

Plant materials vary from region to region. Those mentioned in this chapter are found in the Mid-Atlantic area. Equally interesting materials in other areas can be subjected to the same methods of preservation described here.

However you use the foregoing information, whether for pleasure or for profit, keeping close to the earth does not cost much, and the generous wealth of nature belongs to everyone.

Further Reading:


Dried Flower Designs, Handbook No. 76, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, N. Y. 11225. $1.75.