

Dried Flowers

ALL YEAR LONG



Betsy Williams in her Andover, Massachusetts, garden

Preserving flowers from the garden is fun—and easier than you think.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KAREN BUSSOLINI

ARRANGING INFORMAL bouquets and setting them around the house is one of the pleasures of growing flowers. But when winter looms, it's slim pickings. Knowing how to preserve the color and beauty of fresh flowers by drying presents many decorative options. Workshop teacher and author Betsy Williams of Andover, Massachusetts, is passionate about promoting the use of herbs and flowers (fresh and dried) throughout the seasons. Not many plants escape her adventures in preservation. Over the years, she has discovered that many common garden plants air-dry beautifully without a lot of rigmarole.

The trick is to cut flowers at just the right time, dry them as quickly as possible, and keep them away from humidity and sunlight, which will cause them to lose their color. "You want consistent heat,"





DO-IT-YOURSELF

Hydrangeas

Hydrangeas are baffling; they break all of the rules. Williams cautions not to pick them when just open. New petals are soft and fragile; they need to toughen up. PeeGee types (*Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Grandiflora’ and other paniculata cultivars such as ‘Limelight’ and ‘Tardiva’) clue you in when they’re ready: White petals develop pink or lime shades, typically after the first light frost. Blue mopheads (*H. macrophylla* cultivars) are trickier but worth a try. Williams advises waiting until the flowers are shot through with greens, mauves, and purples “like a thundercloud.” With all of the new varieties on the market, she points out, “it’s worth experimenting with your favorites. Check them out 2, 3, 4 weeks after opening to see how they do.”

To dry hydrangeas, cut off the stems diagonally so that about an inch of internal flesh is exposed and set them in a container with 2 to 3 inches of water. Let them dry in place as the water evaporates. Final color is always a surprise, varying from year to year, depending on weather conditions. Another surprise—dried PeeGee types can be enjoyed in direct sunlight, where they take on lovely peachy tones.



Don’t expect perfect replicas.
Air-dried flowers are quirky
and sometimes imperfect.

Williams explains.

Hang small bunches of flowers in the most consistently warm and dry place in the house. Use a hot attic or lay them in a gas oven if you have a pilot light—90° to 100°F is ideal for quick drying. Williams hangs little bunches high up on the walls and on her dining room candelabra—“the drying itself is decorative.” Hot air rises, so those closest to the ceiling will dry first. The best place of all? She highly recommends the trunk of the car during a heat wave, where, if laid flat on an overturned basket (for good air circulation), many flowers will dry in a few days.

Most blossoms continue to open as they dry, so harvest by cutting stems as flowers are just beginning to open, unless otherwise noted. Don’t expect perfect replicas. Air-dried flowers are quirky and sometimes

imperfect, yet evoke the essence of the once-living flower far better than all-too-perfect silk flowers.

BETSY’S BEST BETS Spring

- Hyacinths and mini daffodils: Enjoy in the garden or as cut flowers until they just begin to fade, then hang to dry. (Hyacinth flowers dry faster than their fleshy stems, which can take a month or more, so be patient.)
- Lilies-of-the-valley: delicate, rare white that dries well
- Tulips: As petals just start to fade, lay them in a basket to dry.

Early to Midsummer

- Border carnations
 - Delphiniums: Pacific hybrids and Connecticut Yankee series
 - Double feverfew
- (continued on page 104)

Create Artful Accents

Stuff a container with floral foam, then clip stems at an angle and poke them into the foam, adjusting length as needed. Williams’s advice: “Start with the largest pieces, such as hydrangeas or larger roses, and lay in other flowers in order of diminishing size. Step back. If you don’t like it, start taking things out.”



“We should surround ourselves with as many small things that give us pleasure as possible.” Without a big investment in time, money, or equipment, dried flowers from your own garden will last for months and “should give you a little thrill every time you walk by. And when they stop giving you pleasure—throw them away.”

—BETSY WILLIAMS

Ideas for Display

Gather and dry your garden’s bounty bit by bit, and by the end of summer you’ll have a nice assortment with which to play. Tuck a spray of dried roses over a mirror or tie a string to a bundle of fragile daffodils or lilies-of-the-valley to hang casually over a picture, taping the string to the back of the frame. Fill a pretty basket. If flowers fall apart, put them into a bowl and savor their colors and textures. Or make an arrangement with sturdier plants. Feel free to mix flowers with seedpods, dried herbs and grasses, or foliage plants. Williams’s cardinal rule is that “the only person you need to please is yourself”—so have fun.



DO-IT-YOURSELF



Easy Wreaths

Tie little bundles together by their stems and lay overlapping bunches on a wreath form, wrapping with transparent nylon thread as you go. Or make a fairy wreath by gluing flowers to a moss-covered form (white glue dries perfectly clear).



- Lady's mantle: Very easy—just pick when in full bloom.
- Larkspur: One of the best; pinks dry very bright, and purple, blue, and white are all good.
- Mexican/African marigold
- Motherwort
- Red bee balm
- Roses: Small spray roses are easiest. If larger roses fall apart, use the petals in potpourri.
- Yellow centaurea

Late Summer to Fall

- Blue mealeycup sage
- Buddleia: especially 'Black Knight'
- Celosia
- Dahlias: smaller, multipetal varieties (not singles)
- Goldenrod
- Liatris

DRYING TIPS

Williams has many pointers about drying:

- Strip leaves from the stems and gather no more than six stems per bunch (two or three for plants with fleshy stems, such as hyacinths and daffodils).
- Stems shrink as they dry, so fasten bundles with elastic bands to keep them firmly bound. String or ribbon, strictly for looks, can be tied over the elastic.
- Don't let bunches touch each other as they hang to dry.

How do you know when they're dry? Check for stiff, crisp stems and squeeze the

back of the flower gently to make sure that the thickest part is perfectly crisp.

Colors change as flowers dry, often intensifying. Most white flowers tend to turn brown or develop grayish tones.

If drying flowers in or on a basket, turn them every day so that they don't dry flat. Bunches of flowers dried while hung on a wall will have a flat side, but this is fine if they're meant to stay on the wall.

Flowers that are more naturally dry—gomphrena, celosias, golden yarrow— and those with thin or hollow stems are the easiest and fastest to dry.

Dried flowers will reabsorb moisture from the air. If you experience summer humidity or a rainy season, store and protect the flowers until conditions are drier or you begin heating your home for the winter: Sprinkle ¼ inch of fresh silica gel on the bottom of an airtight container; place your crisp, bone-dry treasures inside; cover; and set aside for the duration.

Keep most dried flower arrangements out of direct sunlight.

Explore an extensive list of plants for drying at www.betsywilliams.com.

Karen Bussolini is a garden photographer, writer, speaker, and eco-friendly garden coach who tries to keep flowers nearby throughout the year in her Connecticut garden.

Strip leaves from the stems and gather no more than six stems per bunch.

