

Preserving Flowers For Framing

by Diane Day, CPF



By learning how to preserve flowers and foliage, framers can offer their customers another service—one that will help them to remember special events in a personalized way.

Drying and preserving flowers and plant material was a popular pastime during the Victorian era and is becoming so again. Last month, I discussed air drying and various burying methods for preservation. This month, Part II presents some of the basics for microwave drying and glycerin preservation for both flowers and leaves.

For best results, flowers and

foliage should be at their peak and freshly picked. Unfortunately, most of what comes into a frame shop is past its prime, and framers must work with what customers bring in.

Microwave Drying

This procedure works best for flowers that are not fully opened. Otherwise, they may lose their petals during drying.

Place flowers in a silica gel (which works best), or in a mixture

of two parts borax to one part sand or plain kitty litter. This mixture not only supports the flowers so they dry in their normal shape, but it also absorbs the water that is drawn out of the flowers during the drying process.

Place about 1" of drying mixture in the bottom of a microwave container. Cut off all but about a ½" of the stems and then stick the flowers into the mixture face-up. Build up a mound of the mixture about 1" tall around the outside edge of the container. Next, you should tap the container so that the mixture moves in and around the flowers.

Do not place the container directly on the bottom of the oven, but on a rack. Microwave the flowers at a setting of 300 watts, or if the microwave has a defrost setting, use that. Using a half-pound of silica gel, flowers should take about two and a half minutes to dry. The best way to determine the necessary drying time, however, is to use a microwave thermometer.

Put the thermometer about ½" from the flowers. When the temperature get to about 160°, the flowers should be dry. After removing the container, cover it but do not seal it. Let the container sit for about 24 hours before carefully uncovering the flowers.

Glycerin Preservation

This method works well for some flowers and keeps them soft, pliable, and makes them less prone to shedding. Mix one part glycerin and two parts hot tap water. Pour this into a container that is about 2" deep. Smash the bottom inch or so of the flower's stem. (This will

help the flower to absorb the glycerin more quickly.)

Place the stem in the mixture and leave it for three to five days. Some flowers may take one to two weeks. Wait until the stem turns tan. You can also tell if the flower has absorbed enough glycerin by the way it looks and feels. It should look slightly darker than it did before being placed in the mixture, and it should feel soft. Once the flower is removed, cut off the part of the stem that was in the mixture and let it air dry for a week or so.

Preserving Leaves

In addition to drying flowers, some customers may want leaves or foliage preserved as well. As with flowers, the fresher the leaves, the better the result.

A very basic method is to place leaves in a pan and cover them with hot, dry sand. When the sand has cooled, remove the leaves and smooth them out with a hot iron. Next, dip them in a colorless varnish and let them dry.

Microwave Drying

Freshly colored leaves can be dried in a microwave oven. Place a leaf on two sheets of paper towel and cover it with another sheet. Microwave between 30 seconds and three minutes depending on the leaf and moisture content.

If leaves curl after being removed, it means they were not left in long enough. If they are scorched, they were left in too long. After microwaving, let the leaves dry for a day or two before coating with a sealant.

Another microwave method from which you can get even better

results is to place about 1" of silica gel in the bottom of a cardboard box. Then place the leaves flat on top of the gel, making sure they do not touch the sides of the box. Microwave at about 200-300 watts or on defrost for about two minutes. You will have to experiment to get the best results using your particular microwave.

Glycerin Mixture

Glycerin will not preserve the color of the foliage, but the foliage *will* remain pliable, should look waxy and shiny, and can be painted. If done correctly, foliage preserved in this way can be cleaned and will last indefinitely.

To preserve leaves, make a mixture of glycerin and water. Pour the mixture into a flat pan and completely submerge a single layer of leaves.

The proportions and length of time varies with different sources. Auburn University's Home Horticulture suggests equal parts of water and glycerin heated to near the boiling point; then keeping the leaves submerged for two to three weeks, or until they change color. Clemson University's Extension Service suggests a mixture of one part glycerin to two parts very hot water; then soaking for one week.

The leaves should absorb enough liquid to be soft and pliable. Of course, a lot depends on the leaf. A hard, thick magnolia leaf is probably going to take longer than a soft, thin maple leaf. ■

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