

Preserving Flowers For Framing

by Diane Day, CPF

During the Victorian era, drying and preserving flowers and plant material was a common pastime. Today it is popular once again. Below are some methods for drying flowers and plant material that may increase your success with floral projects, as well as enhance the longevity of the flowers themselves. For the best results, flowers should be at their peak and freshly picked. Unfortunately, by the time most flowers are brought into a frame shop, they are well past their prime.

While some plant materials are naturally dry and little effort is needed to preserve them, most plants will not last without some help. Options include air-drying, drying mixtures, microwave drying, freeze-drying, and glycerin and water.

Air-Drying

This is the simplest method for preserving flowers. Tie the stems of the flowers together in a loose bundle and hang them upside down for one to three weeks. Large flowers should be hung individually. For flowers with weak stems, insert florist wire into the stem in order to support the flower during drying. This method will result in muted colors.

For successful air-drying, follow these tips:

- Remove all leaves
- Tie flowers in small bundles and open each bunch into a fan shape so that the flower heads do not touch.
- Hang flowers in a dry, warm, dark area with good circulation.

- If you can not hang the flowers, lay them on drying racks or screens.
- Be sure the flowers are completely dry before framing them.

Burying Methods

There are several types of burying methods. Note that these methods will not work well for flowers that easily shatter or drop their petals.

Sand Drying

This is also a simple and inexpensive method for drying flowers. It is best to have fresh flowers because any



Flowers can be preserved in a variety of ways, many of which are suitable for framing.

imperfections will show up after drying. Stems should be reinforced or replaced with wire. Flowers are dried face down, face up, or horizontally. Flat-faced flowers should be dried face down but other flowers, such as roses, need to be dried face up. For those flowers, cut off all but an inch or so of the stem. Elongated or spiky flowers should be placed horizontally in the drying container.

Cover the flowers carefully with white sand in a deep, open box. First, pour in the sand so that it is deep enough ($\frac{1}{2}$ " to 1") to hold the flowers. Then position the flowers and carefully pour in the sand around them. Be sure to get the sand in and around the petals. You do not want to distort the shape of the flowers, so pour the sand evenly and carefully as you work your way up and over the flowers. When the flowers are completely covered, leave them to dry for one to three weeks. Removing the sand should be done carefully.

Preserving Flowers

Borax

This method involves Borax detergent mixed with cornmeal or sand. The Borax should be run through a sieve to remove any lumps.

Cornmeal is lighter and less apt to flatten flowers than sand. Recipes differ from between one part Borax to between one to 10 parts cornmeal. Place ½" to 1" of the mixture in the bottom of a container and then cover the flowers (see "Sand Drying").

Adding one or two tablespoons of salt for every quart of mixture may speed up the drying process. Depending on the texture of the flowers, drying can take from five days to three weeks in an uncovered container with good air circulation. Do not keep flowers in the drying mixture too long or the petals will become brittle. Gently remove the flowers by sliding your fingers under the bloom and lifting and shaking off the loose mixture. Excess mixture can be removed using a very soft paintbrush.

Silica Gel

Silica gel is an excellent product for drying flowers though it is more expensive than other materials mentioned here and is sold under various names. Because it is lightweight, it does not tend to flatten the flowers and is faster acting than Borax mixtures, drying flowers in two to seven days in an airtight container. Silica gel absorbs moisture and must be kept in an airtight container at all times. See "Sand Drying" section for how to place and cover flowers.

Borax and Silica Gel

A combination of four parts Borax to one part silica gel can also be used as a drying mixture. Use an airtight container and place it in a dry environment for about four weeks. Again, see "Sand Drying" section for how to place and cover the flowers.

Freeze-Drying

This is a preservation method used for fresh flowers and plant material to maintain their true-to-life coloring. The technology was originally produced for the food service industry. A flower is first frozen solid, a vacuum is then pulled and the temperature is increased slowly. This results in water being drawn out of the flower in the form of water vapor. The process is continued until the flower is dried out.

Freeze-drying is a slow process and should not be rushed. If everything goes as planned after 10 to 17 days, the flower emerges with natural looking color. There is no wilting or shrinkage but some flowers turn out better than others depending on their cell structure. Daisy-like flowers may not do well, whereas flowers such as roses are especially beautiful when freeze-dried.

For a directory of companies that do freeze-drying, visit the International Freeze-Dry Floral Association at www.ifdfa.com. ■

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