

Conditioning Flowers -- how to make your cut flowers last longer

We all like to bring in our garden flowers, seed pods and woody-stemmed greens to make floral arrangements. Here are some tips on "conditioning" the garden's bounty. There are two schools of thought on what time of day to cut flowers. Some believe early morning is best when the flower has taken water up the stem to maximum capacity for freshness. However, studies have shown that cutting late in the evening when the plant's "sugars" or nutrients are maximized will prolong the bloom. Experiment to see what works best. Choose a flower that has not fully opened. A full-blown flower won't last as long as one just about to open. Use a sharp knife and make a diagonal cut to increase the exposed surface for water uptake. If possible, it is strongly suggested that you take a bucket of tepid water with you so that the stem can be placed in water immediately. Greens can also be submerged in the water to increase turgidity. Very new growth does not condition well. Experimentation with each specimen will help make a long-lasting arrangement. Remove the leaves that will be below the water line. This will reduce bacterial growth and the flower stems won't clog with foreign matter. Keep your floral design out of direct sun and drafts. If possible, place the arrangement in a cool place at night. Some flowers require a moment of individual care to look their best. Here are some hints:

- Bulbs -- Daffodil, tulip, grape hyacinth, etc. Cut off the white part on the bottom of the stem to ensure water uptake. A pipe cleaner can be threaded up the stem to help "bend" the stem to the position you desire.
- Milky stems -- Poppy, hydrangea, hellebore, clematis, euphorbia. When these flowers are cut, the white sap drains out and the blooms become lifeless. To preserve them, hold each newly-cut stem over the flame of a match or lighter until the stem seals. Alternatively, if you can do it quickly enough, dip the stem in boiling water for 30 seconds then cool tap water to seal the fluid inside.
- Hollow stems -- Delphinium, lupine. If you have placed the stem in water while in the garden, keep your finger over the cut end while placing in a vase. If the water has drained out of the stem, hold the stem upside down over a sink and pour water into the stem (a turkey baster works well). Immediately place in a vase.
- Woody stems -- Lilac, forsythia, crabapple. Use a sharp and clean pruner to cut the stem so it is not sealed together. If the stem is not placed in water within 15-20 minutes, the water uptake cells at the end will dry out and never absorb water. Some people like to peel an inch or so of the bark off the bottom and/or crush the ends slightly with a hammer to expose more cells to the water.
- Nodes on the stems -- Carnation. Make a diagonal cut between the nodes on the stem.

A note on pollen dropping from the flowers to your table. Some flowers, especially in the lily family, will leave an orange stain or at least a mess under your arrangement. When placing the flowers in the vase, remove the stamens with manicure scissors. This won't harm the flower and will actually keep the flower looking fresher without the pollen on the petals.