

Conditioning Cut Flowers and Foliage

Many people enjoy cutting plants from their garden to use in bouquets and floral arrangements. To get the most out of your cut plant material and make it last for the longest possible time, condition it properly using a few tried and true techniques.

Conditioning plant material simply means making sure it is as full of water as possible. Conditioning methods vary with different plants types. The guidelines that follow will help you get the most out of your plants.

Cutting: Choose flowers that are not quite fully developed as they will continue to mature after they are cut. When to cut sometimes depends on the season or time of day. Generally speaking, cut when plants are already as full of water as possible. For many southern gardeners, especially in the summer, this means in early morning when dew still dampens the leaves. For others it means late afternoon or early evening after the plants have spent the day making food. Always water plants well a few hours before cutting to increase turgidity.

For flowers take a bucket of water into the garden when cutting flowers. Place the cut stem immediately in water. A stem out of water forms an air lock that prevents the uptake of water and significantly shortens its life.

Cut each stem at an angle with a sharp implement and remove any leaves that will be under water. Recut the stems under water at a sharp angle to expose more surface area. Cutting under water prevents the formation of an air bubble that inhibits the uptake of water. Place the newly cut stems in tepid water and let them stay for two or three hours or overnight.

Generally speaking, the conditioning bucket should be about a quarter full of warm water to which a floral preservative has been added. Warm water is taken up by the stem more quickly than cold water. Throughout the process, all tools, including the conditioning bucket, should be kept clean and as free of bacteria as possible.

Floral preservative extends the life of most cut flowers by giving them a source of food and inhibiting the growth of bacteria. While commercial products work well, it is easy to make your own. Simply add a tablespoon of vinegar, a teaspoon of sugar and three to five drops of household bleach to a quart of water.

Cutting and trimming:

When cutting from the garden choose the cool of the day and take a bucket of water, rather than a basket, and put the stems into water at once.

Cut all stems on a slant to give a greater area for water up-take.

Slit thick woody stems and scrape away the outer bark for ¼” – 2”, for the same reason. For foliage (woody stem of pittosporum), smash the stem (with a baby hammer) and immediately place in prepared water. Bear grass is just placed in the prepared water. If cut stems have dried out as you take them home from a country walk or from the florist, recut them (to remove any “scab” tissue) before placing in water.

Trim away thorns, snags and bitten, misshapen or crowded leaves and any that are likely to be underwater in the final arrangement.

Allow cut flower and leaves to stand at least two hours, and preferably overnight, in deep water in a cool place so they are fully turgid before you arrange them. At this stage add any substance to prolong cut-flower life if you want to.

Submerge leaves, except grey ones, for the same period, but for very young immature leaves half an hour is enough or they become saturated and brown.

There are various Shock Treatments:

Boiling: foliage sprays, flowers with woody stems (roses, blossom, hydrangeas), and some other such as dahlias, hellebores, anemones and wild flowers, benefit from having 2 inches of the stem and dipped in boiling water for 30 seconds. The flower heads and leaves must be protected by being

wrapped in a cloth. This is particularly suite for rose buds limp at the neck. Afterwards give them the usual long drink.

Singeing: flower stems which exude milky latex when cut – poppies, spurge, poinsettias – need to be singed in an open flame (a candle is best) to seal them.

Floating: rose, hydrangeas and other wilted flowers respond to being floated on water for an hour or two. First recut the stem end.

Re-cutting stems under water: anyone trained in Ikebana will do this for all stems, not just wilted ones. Have a bowl of water handy and re-cut the stem end under water, then give it a long drink.

Defoliating completely: lilac, philadelphus, laburnum need to be completely stripped of leaves so that enough water can reach the flower heads. Sprays of leaves can be arrange separately.

Aftercare:

Water should be topped-up daily if possible. In the first ten or twelve hours plant material will, it is estimated, take up 75 per cent of the water it will need in the next two or three days.

A misting spray of water over flower heads and leaves during the “long drink” stage and

after arranging helps to reduce the loss of water through transpiration by keeping the atmosphere humid. Do this as often as you can in central heating or in very hot weather, but protect polished surfaces as you do so.

These preparations may seem something of a chore to the flower arranging newcomer, but they very soon become routine, and the time taken is assuredly well spent.

**Conditioning
Information
For Floral and Horticulture**

special treatments

immerse hydrangeas & violets completely in water

spray seedheads to prevent 'fluffing' e.g. bulrush, clematis, grasses

wrap tulips in newspaper to keep stems straight

cutting stem under water helps remove air-lock

float wilting flowers to revive

Type of cut			Flower stems	Treatment			
slant	slit	scrape		singe	sub-merge	boil ends	soak stems
✓			soft (e.g. bulb flowers)				✓
✓	✓	✓	woody (e.g. rose, forsythia)			✓	✓
✓			milky (e.g. euphorbia)	✓			✓
		recut under water	wilted			✓	✓
			Leaves				
✓	✓	✓	evergreens	wash			✓
✓			grey/silver		no	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	on a branch (e.g. beech)		✓		✓
✓	✓	✓	tender & new		no	✓	✓
✓			single (ivy, fatsia)	✓			

