

VILLAGE VIEW

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As summer pushes aside this most recent and welcome spring and shoulders to front and center, gardens burst into color filling our eyes and hearts with joys and satisfactions only flowers bring and only gardeners know.

From now until the first killing frost blackens the stalks of summer-blooming plants, a parade of flowers will grace garden plots and brighten rooms, lending their special charms both inside and outside our homes.

If only they lasted longer. If only we could enjoy them throughout the year. If only there were a way to preserve them. And there is, of course; for centuries, flower-lovers have been preserving summer's gifts for winter bouquets. Our grandmothers dried hydrangeas and Queen Anne's lace. They gilded milkweed pods and gathered cattails. They plucked Chinese pennies and pruned bittersweet and bayberry to lighten winter days.

Modern methods for preserving flowers give us greater variety and provide opportunities for making winter bouquets our ancestors would have cherished, and material for flower drying is easily and inexpensively obtained, especially here on the Cape.

Even if one grows no garden of one's own, the lanes and byways offer an abundance of wildflowers suitable for drying. Black-eyed Susan, goldenrod, dock, fern, bluets and bouncing Bet combine delightfully with red top grass to remind us of meadow and woodland long after autumn has given way to the cold and snowy season.

Flower drying as a hobby, like most others, takes time, attention, and storage space, however; patience and practice are also prerequisites; the materials themselves are the most easily obtained of the equipment needed. Preparation is easy. Bring home some beach sand next time you are down at the shore. Scoop up clean dry sand from high above the tideline. A couple of bucketsful should be plenty to start your new hobby. To avoid bruising fragile petals, sift the sand through a piece of fine screening and discard all foreign material.

Spread a layer of sand an inch or two deep in a box. Almost any box will do as long as it's big enough to hold several blossoms and strong enough to hold the sand. Put the box top under the bottom for extra support. Prepare your sandbox before gathering the flowers.

Choose blooms during the hottest and driest hours of the day (the exact opposite of picking fresh flowers for immediate use). Because you'll substitute wire for stems, cut them only an inch or so long and save buds on lateral stems for later selection.

Pick blossoms when they reach their peak, or choose those still in the bud. Experiment with different plant material to find those that appeal most to you. Rosebuds are favorites in dried flower arrangements, but almost any bloom is worth trying. You'll probably have best success with flowers of light and bright color, ranging from pink and orange through the yellows. Deep reds often turn brown in the drying process.

After removing all leaves and being sure the flowers' surfaces are completely dry, carry them quickly to your sand box. Place face down in the sand all such as asters, zinnias, marigolds, and daisies. Roses or other thick flowers dry best face up. Sift handfuls of sand gently over the petals to a thickness of about two inches and leave undisturbed for several days. Check roses, marigolds, or any thick flowers after four or five days; best results are achieved if these are removed from the sand as soon as the outer petals are dry; hang in a warm dry place to finish the process.

Spikey flowers, like snapdragon from the garden or butter-and-eggs from the field, dry well laid flat, without removing them from their stems. Use a large coat box for these.

Grasses, or grains if available, dry quickly by hanging in bunches tied at the base of the stems and left in a warm dry place for a few days. An attic is ideal, but a closet works as well. Cut cattails in mid-June as soon as they appear; these and their leaves dry best if hung.

Once your blossoms are dry, pour the sand gently away from the flowers. Any petals that drop you can re-attach with a drop of glue. To store, keep the flowers in covered boxes in a dry dark place until you have enough to make a bouquet.

Because leaves of most flowering plants won't dry well, use an alternate technique for preserving foliage. Branches from plants with heavier leaves, those of laurel, rhododendron, or even huckleberry, will lend shape and form to arrangements; these, carefully chosen, can provide the skeleton around which you build your design. Pruning them at different seasons results in a variety of color, especially those clipped in the fall.

Into a tall narrow jar pour two-thirds of a cup of water and one-third of a cup of glycerin. Place the stems of newly cut branches in the solution, trim off all damaged leaves, and let stand several days. The liquid will be absorbed by the stems and distributed in the leaves; you can watch the veins darken in color and feel them becoming more pliable. The solution can be re-used even if its color changes.

When your raw material is complete, you can begin making your long-lasting bouquets. Before you start, visit your

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florist and purchase a small supply of floral clay to anchor the material to the bottom of the container, some florist's wire for stems, and corsage tape to wrap the wire. Choose your vases with an eye to the size of the end product. A good rule of thumb is to use a container half as wide and a third as high as you want your finished arrangement to be.

With florist's wire, attach the stumps of the short stems onto the branches you treated with the glycerine-and-water solution. Or, with heavier wire, make stems entirely of wire, pushing it up into the real stems and wrapping with tape. Flowers with thick bases are best handled by thrusting the wire through the base, horizontally, and twisting it around the stem, creating a longer stem of wire.

After some practice with drying and building bouquets, you may prefer to wire your blossoms prior to drying them. At this stage, it's often possible to insert the wire through the face of the flower from below, then to make a U-bend, and pull it gently back to hide in the flower itself.

Attractive arrangements are best achieved by bunching several larger flowers low and close to the mouth of the container. Located here, they focus attention and form a base for smaller, lighter blossoms above; thin spikey material gives height and line.

With practice and perseverance, you'll improve your drying and arranging techniques; patience is a virtue most hobbyists acquire, no matter what medium they choose. Hobbyists begin as novices, and novices, by definition, are inexperienced. Once you've reaped the rewards of success with flower drying, you're bound to appreciate how your garden's bounty can be extended beyond the growing season and into the months when a beanpot of black-eyed Susans is an unexpected pick-me-up for an otherwise dull corner.

As proficiency comes, you'll be sharing your talents and your creations with others who will delight in your long-lasting gifts of thoughtfulness, and you'll spend many a happy hour creating beautiful winter bouquets long after the flowering season is past.



Rosemary Scudder Bowes is pictured in her new shop, Rosemary's Antiques and Collectibles, located in the old Lilly Barn in Osterville. In addition to Rosemary's,

the renovated barn also houses Sew What Else, Olde Cape Cod Insurance Agency, and the Fredericks Insurance Agency. (Village Advertiser Photo by Mark Cote)