



*South Surrey  
Garden Club*

## Cutting and conditioning flowers

Resources and tips for conditioning flowers for the flower and garden show. The schedule is available on the [SSGC website](#).

Credits:

- Page 2-3 - A Cascade of Flowers: an inspirational guide to choosing and arranging flowers by Jane Newdick, Photos by Di Lewis; Blitz Editions
- Page 4 - The Care of Cut Flowers and Foliage; The National Association of Flower Arrangement Societies of Great Britain (NAFAS), 1975
- Page 5: Creative Flower Arrangement; Jean Taylor; Stanley Paul & Co. Ltd; 1973

Other notes:

### **De-foliating:**

Some stems including Lilacs, Mock orange and Laburnum - cannot take up water fast enough to support both flower heads and leaves. Consequently they need to be stripped of leaves completely. Other shrub flowers such as Hydrangeas and Weigela, will benefit from having leaves thinned out.

### **Alcohol:**

Maple stems  
Bamboo

Use preservative or if not available substitute with either vinegar or lemon juice to change the pH of the water

Use scissors to cut out bug chew off the leaves for Roses and Dahlia exhibits - leave the top two sets of leaves on the exhibit.

# FLOWER CARE

## CUTTING AND CONDITIONING FLOWERS

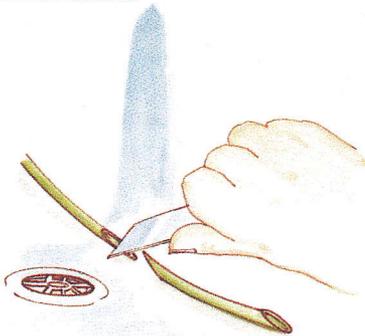
### CUTTING FLOWERS

Garden flowers are best cut in the early morning or evening, when transpiration is at its lowest. On a hot, sunny afternoon, they will naturally have less moisture in their cells and therefore be more prone to wilt. As flowers always benefit from a long drink before they are used, this may determine just when they are gathered. Ideally, a drink overnight is perfect if they are to be used the next morning, so evening picking is probably best. Always gather flowers quickly and put them into water as soon as possible. Choose fresh, healthy blooms just coming into full flower, or in slightly open bud. Condition the flowers as described below.

### BUYING FLOWERS

Shop-bought flowers are usually conditioned before they are sold, but you can still re-cut the stems under water yourself. Make sure you buy flowers from a shop or stall that has a quick turnover and fresh supplies brought in from markets at least twice a week.

### CONDITIONING



**1** Cut flower stems at a sharp angle, so that the maximum area of the cut end is exposed to the water. Do this under water if possible.



**2** Peel back a little of the bark of woody stems of shrubs and trees, then hammer or split the first inch or so to allow the water to penetrate easily. This can be done with a hammer, sharp garden secateurs or strong scissors.

**3** Stand the prepared flowers in a bucket filled with warm water and leave them to have a long drink for several hours or overnight.



**4** If the stems are bent and you want to straighten them, wrap the flowers tightly in newspaper and plunge into water. This method is particularly effective for flowers such as tulips and gerbera.



**5** Certain flowers exude a milky sap which interferes with their water intake. The stems of flowers such as poppies, euphorbia and ferns can be sealed by singeing the ends over a flame.

**6** Some flowers, for example poppies, will last longer if their stems are plunged into a small amount of boiling water for a few minutes.



**7** The large, hollow stems of flowers such as delphiniums and hippeastrums can be filled with water and then plugged with a small piece of cotton wool. Stand the stems in water straight after this treatment.



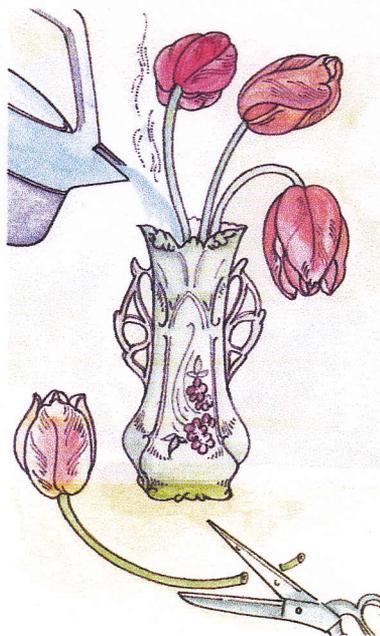
**8** Always strip the lower leaves off stems so that they do not sit under water in the vase. Rotting leaves will pollute the water and encourage the creation of bacteria, cloudy water and an unpleasant smell.



**9** Roses should have all their thorns removed, as well as any extra leaves and small branches. Strip the thorns off the stems with the blade of a pair of scissors, or use a tool available specially for this purpose.



**10** Some lilies have pollen-laden stamens that can brush against clothes and furnishings and stain indelibly. To prevent this, carefully snip out the stamens.



**11** If flowers wilt unexpectedly, try reviving them by recutting the stems and standing them in shallow hot water for about half an hour. Position the flowers away from the steam when adding the water.

**12** A good method of conditioning foliage is to immerse it completely in water for a few hours. Do not use this method on grey- or silver-leaved foliage, or on any plants that have woolly foliage.



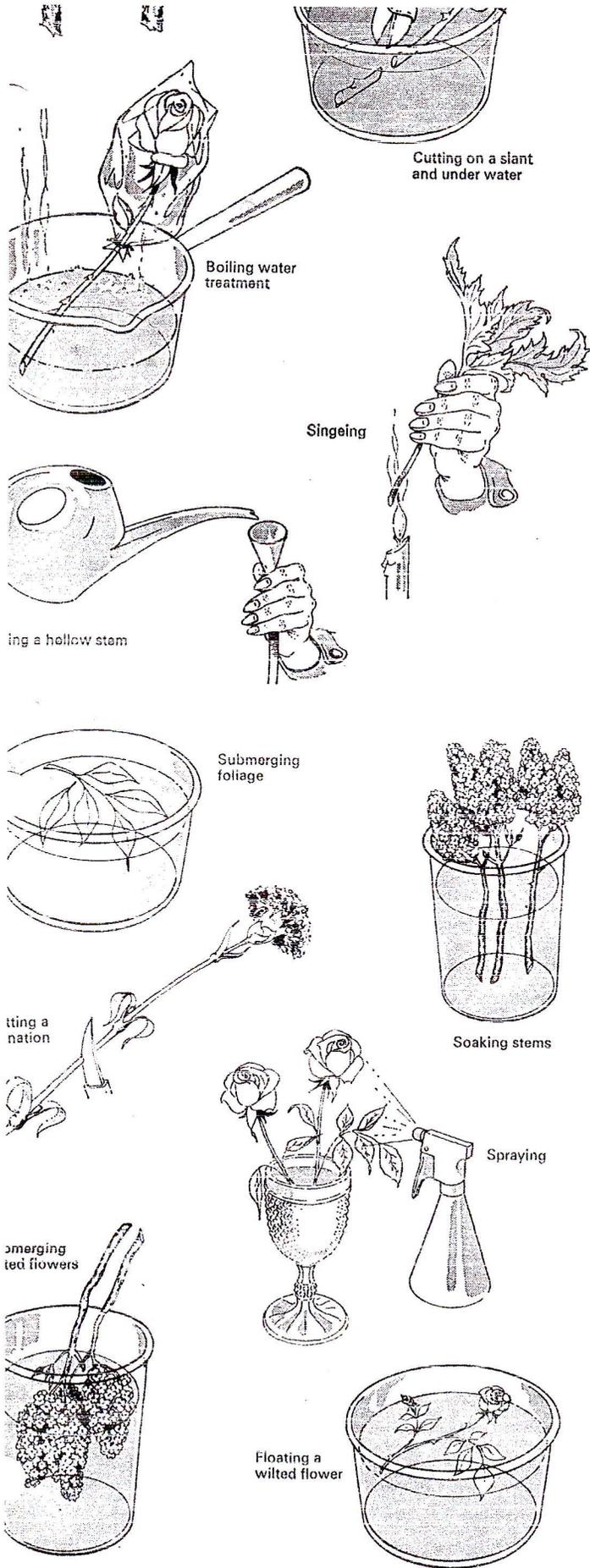
**13** Remove the topmost buds of flowers such as gladioli to ensure that the lower buds will open.

#### TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT



#### CUTTING TOOLS

Among the most essential tools for flower arranging are a pair of good-quality secateurs or special florists' scissors with short blades.



- 3 If stems are thick and hard, slit ends for about 1".
- 4 Scrape about 2" of bark from the ends of woody stems and remove any thorns.
- 5 Remove lower leaves which decay if left under water in the container.

**Re-cutting**

Remember that once a stem has been cut and left for any time out of water the cut will seal over and an airlock may form behind it, preventing the further uptake of water. When flowers are carried home from the florist, from a friend's garden or from the countryside, stems should always be re-cut removing about an inch, preferably under water, before the next conditioning step. This removes any seal and airlock and allows the uptake of water again.

**Conditioning Processes**

The conditioning chart given overleaf shows which processes are best for each type of plant material.

**Boiling**

Bunch stems together, with ends roughly level, and protect flowers and foliage by wrapping in a cloth or bag. Plunge stem ends, to a depth of about one inch, into boiling water for a minute. This should break through any seal and remove some of the air in the stem, allowing water to be taken up. The plant material may be left in the water until it cools. This treatment also sterilizes stem ends minimizing the growth of bacteria, which may shorten the life of a flower.

**Singeing**

Hold the stem tip in a flame (gas, match or candle) until the end is blackened. The effect is similar to boiling. In the case of stems which exude a milky fluid this is a necessary process to prevent the fluid from coagulating and blocking the intake of water. It also stops further fluid from leaking out. If the stem is later re-cut, the singeing should be repeated.

**Filling**

Hollow stems may be upturned and filled with water, using a long-spouted watering can and a funnel. After filling the stems should be plugged with cotton wool, which acts as a wick, before they are placed in a bucket of water.

**Washing**

Foliage, especially evergreen, is often dusty and dirty. Swish it through a bowl of tepid water containing a small squeeze of washing-up detergent, then rinse with clear water. The bath may be used for larger branches.

**Submerging**

Submerge foliage in a bowl of warm water for about two hours, as foliage absorbs water through its surface tissue. Young foliage may become water-logged if left longer but older foliage and evergreens may be left overnight. Grey leaves should not be submerged or the greyness will be lost.

**Soaking Stems**

Immediately after carrying out any of the processes suggested stand stems in a bucket of deep, warm water. This should be left in a cool place, sheltered from draughts, for a minimum of two hours and preferably overnight. The stems should then be full of water and turgid.

**After Care**

However well conditioned before arranging, cut plant material will wilt or die more quickly if subjected to:

**Lack of water** – containers and water-retaining foam should be topped up daily.

**Heat** – avoid putting flower arrangements in full sun, by a fire or radiator, on the television set or near strong lamps.

**Dry atmosphere** – central heating is usually the cause. A frequent atomising spray will help.

**Draughts** – they cause loss of water.

**Wilted Flowers** – these may be revived by re-cutting the stem under water, boiling the stem end, submerging the flower or floating it in water, or by combining any of these methods.

**Cleanliness**

Experiments show that cleanliness helps to prolong the life of cut plant material. Cutters should be kept clean and sharp. Containers, pinholders and wire netting should be washed in water containing a little disinfectant and dried before storing.

Further instruction in conditioning cut plant material is given to students attending flower arrangement classes.

Information about classes may be obtained from the Local Education Officer or from a flower arrangement club. The location of flower arrangement clubs for demonstrations, shows and practice meetings may be found by contacting:

NAFAS, 21a Denbigh Street, London SW1V 2HF  
Tel. 01-828 5145

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**SPECIAL TREATMENT IN CONDITIONING**

- Camellia*: spray often.
- Carnation*: cut above a 'knob'.
- Chrysanthemum*: use chlorhexidine to decrease bacteria.
- Clematis*: immerse whole flower for an hour.
- Clematis vitalba (Old Man's Beard)*: put in glycerine mixture (1 part glycerine to 2 parts hot water) before the flower appears.
- Acacia (mimosa, wattle)*: keep in a polythene bag until immediately before arranging.
- Anemone*: condition in warm water.
- Autumn leaves turning colour*: spray with 1 part glycerine mixed with 3 parts water.
- Bulbous plants*: arrange in shallow water after conditioning, to avoid soggy stems.
- Bulrush*: spray with hair lacquer or varnish to prevent blowing.
- Foliage*: soak, then arrange in water containing soluble aspirin (half an aspirin to 1 pint water). This closes the pores and so retains moisture.
- Gardenia*: keep in airtight bag until used. Handle with wet hands.
- Gerbera*: easily forms air bubbles in stem, cut under water and stand in 1" of boiling water. Add warm water.
- Hydrangea*: immerse flower heads in water for 1 hour.
- Hellebore*: pick in the fruit stage for longest life.
- Holly berries*: pick before the birds eat them, stand in a bucket half full of water. Place a polythene bag over the top and tucked in the sides and leave out of doors.
- Lily*: remove anthers to prevent pollen damage to clothing and petals.
- Ranunculus*: wrap tightly in newspaper while conditioning to keep stems straight.
- Tulip*: as above.
- Sansevieria leaf*: avoid putting directly in water which causes sogginess. Wrap ends in polythene to keep dry in water.
- Syringa (lilac), Philadelphus, Viburnum opulus*: defoliate.
- Violet*: immerse flower head in water overnight as humid conditions are required.

Type of plant material	Cutting							
	slant-cut	slit	scrape	boil	singe	submerge	soak ster	
<b>Flowers</b>								
1 Soft stems								
2 Harder stems								
3 Woody stems								
4 Milky stems (poppies, spurges)								
5 Hollow stems (lupins, delphiniums)		fill with water and plug						
6 Wilted flowers		cut as for type				or		
						or		
<b>Foliage</b>								
7 Single leaves								
8 Branches								
9 Very young								
10 Grey/Silver		DO NOT wash or submerge						

Other Leaflets in this Series

No. 1 Tools and Equipment for Flower Arrangement  
 No. 3 Preserving Plant Material with Glycerine  
 No. 4 Drying Plant Material

No. 6 Making a Pot-in-Pot  
 No. 7 Spray Water for Beginners  
 No. 8 Preserving Flowers with Glycerine

No. 10 Foliage for Flower Arrangement  
 No. 11 Spray Water for Professionals  
 No. 12 Preserving Flowers with Glycerine