

CONDITIONING FLOWERS

Whether you are cutting flowers and foliage from your own garden, or simply love flowers and want to get the very most from them. **Conditioning** involves the preparation of cut plant material prior to its arrangement, to ensure that its life is not unduly shortened. Correct conditioning will make sure that flowers and foliage last for the maximum time, providing the most value and enjoyment.

Commercial grown flowers are specifically bred, selected and conditioned to last well. The advice given below is useful knowledge for all flowers, but it is especially beneficial for home grown stems, as many garden flowers require some additional preparation after cutting.

Cut most stems on a 45 degree angle. You are increasing the surface area for the water to get to the flower. Remove all the lower foliage which will be below the level of the water.

Let the stems stand in a cool place, out of direct sunlight, in tepid water for several hours (preferably overnight) to give them a good long soak.

Adding some cut-flower food; this will extend the bloom time by several days. There are numerous brands of cut flower food available. Be sure to follow the directions for diluting these concentrates/powders.

It's worth avoiding very new growth, such as spring foliage, as it is very difficult to condition, and does not last well.

An understanding of different stem types important to consider when conditioning plants for use in arrangements. It can be helpful to think about conditioning flowers according to their stem type.

Solid, sturdy stems

Examples: *Celosia*, *Marigolds* and *Statice*

Sturdy stems need only the diagonal cut to absorb maximum water. They should be left to drink in lukewarm water with preservative for a minimum of one hour before arranging.

Hollow Stems

Examples: *Delphinium*, *Lupin*, *Amaryllis*, *Bells-of-Ireland*, *Dahlias*, *Hollyhocks*

The stems of hollow-stemmed flowers need to be filled with water. Most commercially grown hollow stemmed flowers are grown for their suitability to draw the water up the stems naturally. If you are cutting hollow-stemmed flowers from your garden avoid allowing the stem to form an air-lock that results when air enters the stem as soon as it is cut. Cut the stems at an angle while holding them under water. You can also turn the flower upside down and fill the hollow stem with tepid water, plug the stem with a small piece of cotton bound gently with a rubber band and then put it in the water. The water trapped inside will keep the stem strong and straight. You can add strength to the stem by inserting a thick stick or wire up the stems.

Bulbous Stems

Examples *Daffodil*, *Iris*, *Hyacinth*

Most bulbous stemmed flowers are pulled, not cut, from the plant by the grower. This means that the end of the stem is often white and firm. Bulb flowers such as hyacinths, should be cut where the green on the stem starts—just above the white bulb. The stem will often not drink from the white area therefore, it should be removed completely. Extremely soft stems e.g hyacinths and Daffodils are best cut horizontally. Hardy bulbs do better in a vase of cold water, unless the flowers are wanted open, as warm water speeds up the development of bulbous flowers. Special flower food for bulb flowers is available, and can be used.

Daffodil stems exude a sticky sap when cut and should always be conditioned separately. The sap will shorten the life of other flowers. Searing is not effective in halting the seepage of secretion from daffodils. If daffodils are being arranged in water, they should be arranged separately. If you use floral foam, daffodils can be arranged together with other flowers.

Soft Stems

Examples: *Freesia*, *Anemone*

These should be conditioned by cutting the stem ends at a sharp angle, removing all the lower foliage which will be below the level of the water, and placing the stem ends in a bucket about 1/4 filled with tepid water, which has had the appropriate amount of cut flower food added. Allow them to have a good overnight drink, the flowers can then be arranged.

Thin Stems

Example: *Tulips*

Thin stems tend to bend and are best bundled together and left to sit for several hours in water before being placed in an arrangement. Tulips are a classic example of flowers that benefit from this treatment. Another tip for tulips if they start to droop is to take a pin and prick a small hole in the stem just below the flower.

Woody Stems

Examples: *Lilac, Viburnums, Dogwood, Mimosa*

For woody plant material cut the stem at a sharp angle, and split the stem ends by cleanly cutting for about 2 cm. Remove all the lower foliage which will be below the level of the water, and place the stems in a bucket about $\frac{1}{4}$ filled with tepid water, which has had the appropriate amount of cut flower food added. Be sure to cleanly cut the stems at the ends rather than smash them. This will keep vascular tissues intact and create more surface area to absorb water.

Semi-Woody Stems

Examples: *Chrysanthemum, Lily, Asparagus Fern*

These should be conditioned by cutting the stem ends at a sharp angle, removing all the lower foliage which will be below the level of the water, and placing the stem ends in a bucket about $\frac{1}{4}$ filled with tepid water, which has had the appropriate amount of cut flower food added. Special flower food is available for Lilies.

Milky Stems

Examples: *Euphorbia, Poinsettia*

The stems of some flowers exude a milky substance, called latex, when cut. This can be messy, and also can be an irritant if it comes into contact with the skin. The sap that oozes into the water and clogs the vascular system of other flowers in the container, preventing them from absorbing water, therefore, plant material in this category should have the stem ends cut, and then stems need to be seared before the flowers are placed in the arrangement. There are two ways to accomplish this: Either dip the cut end of the flower in boiling water for 30 seconds or apply a flame from a match or candle to the per-cut flower stem for a few seconds, to seal it.

SPECIAL NOTES

Carnations and pinks should have their stems cut between the node or joint, as they cannot take up water if cut or broken on the node.

Hellebores and Hydrangeas cut from your garden are notoriously difficult to condition, especially when the flowers are fresh. Both will benefit from boiling water treatment. Place the stem ends in about an inch of boiling water for around 40 seconds. This will force out the air from the stems and allow better uptake of water. Then re-cut the stem ends and put them into water up to their necks overnight before arranging.

Wait until Hellebores have formed (or are beginning to form) seed pods. At this stage they will condition very well and last a long time.

For long-lasting hydrangeas, submerge them, head down in a bowl of cold water for one hour to help firm their petals. Let the flowers drip dry, cut their stems at a 45-degree angle and place stems in warm water overnight. Alternatively wait until Hydrangea blooms have matured and turn slightly papery before cutting; very young flowers often don't condition well.

Grey foliage plants such as Santolina or Senecio, or woolly foliage such as Stachys should never be fully immersed to condition it, as the water is absorbed by the grey covering and the color of the foliage will get mottled.

Stem ends should not be hammered, as this causes damage to the tissues, which leads to a buildup of bacteria, and shortens the life of the material. Older references may advise this, it is a technique that is no longer recommended.

One of the most common causes of wilting in cut flowers and foliage is the presence of an air-lock in the stem, a bubble of air that becomes trapped and stops the water flow reaching the head of the flower. The air-lock usually forms as the flower is cut, when pressure forces air into the water ducts of the stem in which there is normally a partial vacuum.

Flowers cut from the garden and left for any time before being conditioned will also form an air lock, so always carry a bucket of water with you into the garden, so that you can place the plant material into water immediately, on a temporary basis, thus preventing the stem ends from drying out.