

# Ikebana

By Kathy Wolfe  
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## The way of flowers

A graceful twig, the perfect bloom presented in a pleasing vessel that reflects the spirit of the season: Such is the beauty of ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging.

Ikebana is more than simply putting flowers in a container. It emphasizes the importance of developing a closeness with nature. Materials used include living branches, leaves, grasses and blossoms. The beauty of the arrangements come from color combinations, natural shapes, graceful lines and the overall form of the composition. Asymmetry and the use of empty spaces between the flowers can be as important as the flowers themselves. Within the confines of the rules governing ikebana lie great possibilities for creative expression.

Ikebana may have sprung from the custom of presenting flower offerings to honor Buddha in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The first school of Ikenobo was established in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with Buddha's priests and members of the nobility perfecting rules regarding placement and type of plants used. This school celebrated its 550<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year.

As time passed, many different schools arose, styles changed and ikebana came to be practiced at all levels of society. The Rikka (standing flower) style uses seven branches representing hills, valleys, waterfalls and other natural objects. The tea ceremony style (Chabana) focuses on rustic simplicity. Seika or Shoka combines three main branches to symbolize heaven, earth and man and showcases the beauty and uniqueness of each plant.

The first modern school started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and used a form call Moribana (piled up flowers) in a shallow, flat container. Up until this time ikebana had been practiced by men only, but as the merchant princes became more influential, women began taking lessons.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many new schools and styles began to appear and ikebana became a popular pastime and almost requisite for a genteel woman. There are more than 3,000 different schools of ikebana registered with the Japanese Minister of Education today.

Equipment needed for any ikebana arrangement starts with the container. This may be selected as an inspiration for which flowers and branches you choose or the plant material can be chosen first and the container determined to complement. The container size should fit well with the space in which it will be placed. Materials must be cut in proportion to the container size.

One can use anything from a ceramic dish or glass pot, to bamboo baskets and other containers from nature. Seasonality is a primary consideration in choosing both floral materials and the container that holds them. For example, a light color may be used in spring while fall lends itself to darker hues.



Ikebana flowers do not have to be expensive or rare blossoms from a specialty florist. By observing the unique flowers in your own garden, such as these Oriental poppies, you can learn to create an arrangement of quiet simplicity. *Photo by Chris Farrow / WSU Skagit County Extension*

When using a glass container, particularly transparent glass, remember that the glass acts as a lens and magnifies whatever is contained inside. You may want to cover your kenzan (flower holder) if using this type of vessel.

The kenzan can be of many kinds, including the needle point frog, a tubular basket of wire or bamboo (gabion holder), a turtle or crab holder, bundled straw or naturally Y-shaped branches, to name a few.

The flowers, or hana, are also an important consideration. Many flower types are symbolic to different seasons. A pine bough might be used in a New Year's Day arrangement or an iris or peach blossom in spring. Camellias or narcissus may appear at events such as wedding anniversaries and baby showers. Chrysanthemums are often used in the fall, but tropical flowers are rarely used because they are without a season. There are long lists of suggestions of plant materials to use for auspicious occasions and most correspond to seasonal bloom.

Clippers, called hasami, are needed to cut plant material. These clippers do not have a spring in the grip the way most garden shears or cutters do.

The study of any school of ikebana can take a lifetime. But one can learn some basic principles to begin understanding this beautiful art form. Master Gardener Mary Kay Branch will conduct an ikebana workshop at the Know and Grow class on Tuesday, June 18, at 1:00 p.m. at the Northwest Washington Research and Extension Center's Sakuma Auditorium, 16650 State Route 536, Mount Vernon. Mary Kay lived with her husband in Japan for thirty-two years and studied ikebana and the Japanese tea ceremony during her time there.

Mary Kay represents the Ryusei-ha school of ikebana and will teach the Basic Upright Style. This is the style students often learn first in most schools and gives a good basis for further learning and experimentation. Students will bring their own shallow container (round, square or rectangular) rather than a vase. A kitchen casserole bowl can work as well as more traditional containers.



**Left:** Close up of Egyptian walking onion (allium) and calendula arrangement. **Middle:** The playfully twisting stems of Egyptian walking onions add unexpected energy to this example of an ikebana floral arrangement. **Right:** Clippers, called hasami, are needed to cut plant material. These clippers do not have a spring in the grip the way most garden shears or cutters do. The flower holders are called kenzan and the flowers are hana.  
*Photos by Chris Farrow / WSU Skagit County Extension*

A \$5 class fee will be charged to cover the cost of flowers Mary Kay will supply. Participants will also need to have a needle-point frog (kenzan) to support the plant material. If the student does not have one, kenzans can be purchased for \$15 each from Mary Kay. Clippers or flower shears should also be brought to class.

As Mary Kay reminds us, any ikebana student who follows the simple rules and practices them repeatedly will be able to create lovely arrangements. Simplicity can be elegant! Come try it for yourself.

## **RESOURCES:**

- General Rules and Basic Styles of Ikebana.  
<http://www.agriinfo.in/default.aspx?page=topic&superid=2&topicid=1292>
- The Essentials of Ikebana . Edited by Patricia Massy.

- Mastering Basic Styles. Reiko Takenaka. <http://www.holymtn.com/garden/ikebana2.htm>
- Ikebana. <<http://www.japan-zone.com/culture/ikebana.shtml>>
- Ikebana Containers – An Important Part of the Ikebana Arrangement.. Ralph deVille <<http://ezinearticles.com/?Ikebana-Containers---An-Important-Part-of-the-Ikebana-Arrangement&id=3975458>>
- Ikebana – The Way of Japanese Flower Arranging. Joshua M. Smith, PhD. <<http://ezinearticles.com/?Ikebana---The-Way-of-Japanese-Flower-Arranging&id=6596798>>
- Ikebana. Claudia Miclaus. 10/01/2011. <<http://ezinearticles.com/?Ikebana---The-Way-of-Japanese-Flower-Arranging&id=6596798>>
- Article listing on Ikebana <http://www.lovethatkimchi.com/Ikebana/Articles.html>
- The Ikebana Way. <<http://chatham-kent.fitdv.com/new/articles/article.php?artid=722>>



### Learn to Arrange Flowers Japanese-style

WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Mary Kay Branch will teach a hands-on class in the Japanese art of ikebana in this *WSU Know and Grow Workshop*.

When: 1 PM Tuesday, June 18

Where: WSU's Sakuma Auditorium, 16650 Highway 536,  
Mount Vernon

Cost: \$5 for materials. Bring a container and a needlepoint frog for your arrangement.

Note: Preregistration is required at [dmwisen@fidalgo.net](mailto:dmwisen@fidalgo.net) or call 360-336-8958 and leave your name and phone number.