

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: Aug 14, 2005
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Cut flowers, whether purchased from the florist or cut from your own garden, will last much longer in the vase if you follow some simple rules of thumb. First, use a clean vase. It is critical to use hot soapy water to eliminate bacteria and fungi and then rinse thoroughly.

The next important step is to prepare the flowers properly. Flowers should be cut just as they are opening early in the morning. Carry a container of water with you and place the stems in the water immediately after cutting. The flowers that ooze a milky "sap" such as poinsettias, sunflowers and poppies, should have the bottom two inches immersed in boiling water for 10 seconds before using them in an arrangement. Always remove lower leaves from the stem so there will be none in the vase water. Before you put any flowers in the vase, re-cut the stems, removing 1 to 2 inches at an angle under water. This is especially important for roses. You can do this in a basin full of water, or even by holding the stem and the blades of the shears (or kitchen scissors) under running tap water. Flowers in most arrangements collapse early because they are unable to obtain enough water to keep them looking crisp and fresh. By ensuring that no air bubbles get in the stem, you will have longer lasting arrangements. Using lukewarm water in your vase will encourage your flowers to take up the water. You should try to avoid using ice-cold water.

Do not crush or burn flower stems. This seems to be of little value. You can split the stems up about half an inch to an inch. This is done the easiest with your hand pruners. Always use a preservative in the vase water. You can use the commercially prepared ones or you can make your own. A good recipe for this is the one recommended by the University of California Santa Clara Extension: 2 tablespoons of lemon juice (fresh or bottled, we are not going for flavor here), 1 tablespoon of sugar and one-fourth teaspoon of bleach. Combine ingredients and add to a quart of lukewarm water, then fill your vase. Add another one-fourth teaspoon of bleach to the vase every 4 days.

If you are using florist foam as an arranging aid, let it soak in the vase solution (the vase solution being the one with the preservative added to the water) until it sinks. Do not push it down into the container as air bubbles will remain inside the foam and cause early flower death. Insert stems carefully. If a stem bends or creases, re-cut the stem. Keep flowers cool. The higher the temperature, the faster flowers will fade. Do not place arrangements in sunny locations, near heaters or fireplaces, or on top of television sets. Do not put arrangements in a cool place overnight if you possibly can.

Keep your arrangements simple. Just start with your tallest/largest flower and keep adding flowers until you are satisfied. Perhaps only one flower is appealing. A nice selection of greenery and colorful blooms is always cheerful.

Enjoy your flowers and happy arranging!

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.