

Making Lasting Bouquets

By Kathy Wolfe
July 10, 2020



A creative journey

A fresh bouquet, whether from your own garden, a local flower grower or a floral designer, brings a smile to your face and warmth to your home. But cut flowers can be all too fleeting. A few simple measures can go a long way to maximize their vase life.

Clean your vases and sharpen your cutting tools.

Bacteria in dirty vases will make the water murky and cause flowers to rot. Clean your vases with hot, soapy water and rinse well before storing them.

Dull shears, scissors or knives can crush vascular systems and prevent water from traveling up the plant stem. Sharpening your tools regularly will have them ready at a moment's notice.

Pick flowers with longevity.

The life of cut flowers varies widely. Some last only 1-2 days while others can last 2-4 weeks. Annuals such as giant zinnias, sunflower, larkspur, tall snapdragons and lisianthus last well in arrangements. Longer lasting perennials include the peony, *Rudbeckia*, Asiatic lily, *Hosta* and purple coneflower. Carnations, *Alstromeria* and chrysanthemums are also good for the long term. Feel free to mix in more ephemeral blooms as short-term accents that can be plucked out once they wilt.

Harvest your flowers correctly.

When cutting your own flowers, keep stems hydrated from the moment they are removed by placing them directly into a pail of lukewarm water containing a flower preservative. Remember that the best time to cut is in the morning when their stems are filled with water and carbohydrates and they are firm to the touch. As the day warms, dehydration sets in as water evaporates from the leaves, causing stems to bend and flowers to become limp.

Different types of flowers should be harvested at the appropriate stage in their development. Flowers with multiple buds should have at least one bud starting to open before cutting. This holds true for spike flowers (delphiniums, snapdragons, gladioli, etc.) and cluster flowers (agapanthus, baby's breath, verbena and the like). Flowers on single stems should be more fully opened when cut.



Fill vase about three-quarters full and keep the vase out of direct sun for longer-lasting blooms. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Remove foliage from the stem that might go underwater. Submerged foliage can cause bacteria and other organisms to multiply. Let your flowers sit in the water for at least an hour to ensure hydration and cooling before arranging in a vase.

Prepare stems correctly based on their type.

Flower stems can be hearty, hollow, soft, woody or milky. Each uses a different treatment to encourage longer vase life.

Hearty stems (marigold, statice, cockscomb, etc.) need a simple diagonal cut to maximize water absorption.

Hollow stems (including *Amaryllis*, dahlias, delphiniums, hollyhocks) need to be filled with water by turning the flower upside down and pouring water into the open cavity in the stalk. Use your thumb over the opening at the bottom of the stem then place it in water. The water trapped inside will keep the stem straight and strong.

Soft stems include bulb plants like *Iris*, tulips and hyacinths. Cut just above the white bulb where the green on the stem begins. These plants perform better in cold water.

Woody stemmed flowers (lilac, dogwood, mock orange, heather) need their stems to be split at the ends but not smashed. This will keep vascular tissues intact and create more surface area to absorb water.

Milky stemmed flowers secrete latex sap that enters the water and clogs the vascular system of other flowers, preventing them from absorbing water. Milky stemmed plants include *Euphorbia*, poinsettia, poppies and balloon flowers. Dipping the cut end of the flower into boiling water for 20-30 seconds or applying a flame from a match or candle to the pre-cut flower for the same period will accomplish this. Do not use a pin style flower holder with seared stems because it defeats the purpose of the searing. Daffodils also contain a milky sap that will not be contained by searing so they should not be mixed with other flowers.

Add preservatives to the vase water.

A good preservative contains carbohydrates to provide food to the flowers, acidifiers which lower the pH allowing plants to more easily take up water, and biocides to prevent bacteria or fungi from growing in the water. Commercial preservatives are scientifically balanced for easy and accurate use or you can use a DIY recipe that works for you.

Flower maintenance.

If you use cut flowers from a florist or flower farmer, trim at least ½” off the stems once you come home. Place in water with preservatives immediately so stems do not seal up. Check the water level on any cut flower arrangement on a regular basis. The more flowers in the vase, the more water will be consumed. Ideally, water should be ¾ full in the vase or container. Remove stems as they die and any leaves that fall below the water line. Periodically remove flowers from the vase, wash container to remove any bacteria particles, replace the water, add more preservatives and re-cut the stems ½” from the bottom. Reposition your blooms back into the container.

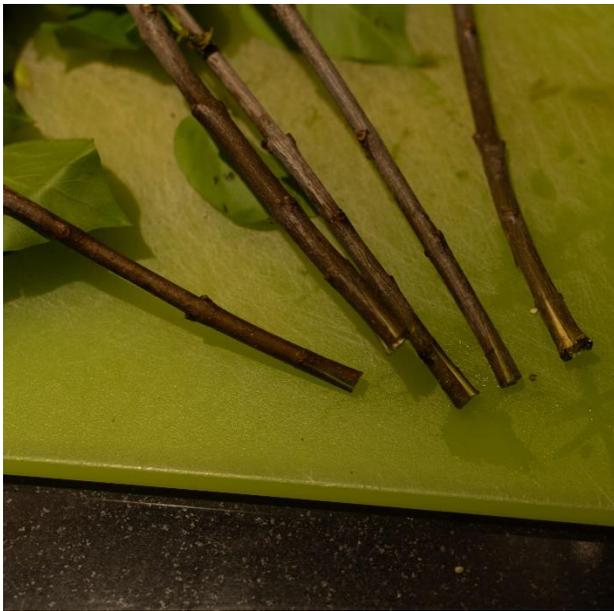
Vase placement is important.

Keep arrangements away from drafts or direct sunlight. Both will stress the flowers to open and die quickly. Cool temperatures and shade will extend vase life. If evenings are cool but well above freezing, arrangements can be moved outside in a protected location when not being viewed, much like placing them in a florist cooler.

Keep flowers away from ripening fruit which emits ethylene gas, preventing buds from opening, causing petals to have poor color and shortening the life of the flowers.

Some flowers, e.g., lilies and poinsettias, can be toxic to children and pets so keep them well away.

Your arrangement will change as some of the flowers die off. You may want to create new bouquets with the remaining flowers by adding your own foliar filler, changing out vases or adding new blooms. A bouquet can transform from a large focal point on the dining room table down to a lovely single flower in a bud vase in your kitchen. Enjoy the creative journey!



Woody stemmed flowers such as lilacs will last longer if you split the ends slightly to get more water in. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

RESOURCES:

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