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Flower Arranging

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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Arranging flowers is no mystery. You don’t have to be an expert to enjoy it. Don’t be afraid to start. Begin by learning the principles and fundamentals; then “learn by doing.” If you make mistakes, have a good laugh at yourself and keep trying.

If you raise your own flowers, you will not only have the satisfaction of watching them grow, but you will have some of your own materials for making arrangements. Flowers can also be secured from florist’s shops.

Like the other arts, flower arranging is based on natural forms. Nature designs and colors the flowers; you select the flowers and design the arrangement. To create a satisfying arrangement, follow basic art principles such as design, balance, scale, harmony, and color. Like other artists, you must be willing to practice.

Even if you practice faithfully, don’t expect all your arrangements to be masterpieces. When you have flowers in the garden, make at least one arrangement every day. Get acquainted with your flowers and learn the types of arrangements for which they are best suited.

Have a definite purpose or place in mind before you start the arrangement. Allow plenty of time to arrange the flowers. It is impossible to make a pleasing arrangement if you are in a hurry.

**flowers and foliage**

**Spikes** have a narrow straight look and pointed tip. Examples are gladiolus, snapdragons, stocks, delphiniums, rose buds, iris leaves, and grain heads. Use spikes in the arrangement first to form the pattern of the design.

**Buttons** are round or roundish looking. Examples are zinnias, marigolds, open roses, petunias, carnations, and chrysanthemums. Use button-type flowers to divide the space into interesting patterns. They also add accent and a focal point that attracts the eye of the viewer.

**Background or filler flowers and foliage** have texture and an irregular outline that adds interest to the arrangement. Baby’s breath (gypsophila), perennial static, and asparagus fern are examples.

Background material may be used if it is available, but it is not as essential as the spike and button type materials. Put these fillers into the arrangement after the spikes and before the buttons or put them in last. Do not use so much filler that the lines and accents are obscured. Foliage is often used as filler or for establishing the lines of the arrangement.

**CONDITIONING FLOWERS**

To make a good arrangement, you must start with good material. If the arrangement is to remain pleasing for several days, the flowers will need to be properly conditioned.
Flowers keep best when they are cut with a sharp knife and put in water immediately. The cut should be clean and smooth, and at an angle. The maturity of flowers affects their keeping quality. Roses, gladiolus, iris, poppies, and peonies should be cut before the bloom opens. Flowers such as asters, dahlias, zinnias, marigolds, chrysanthemums, and delphiniums should be well opened when cut. For greater interest in your arrangement, cut flowers at several stages of development even though the more mature flowers will not last as long as the buds.

For best results, cut flowers in early evening when the plant is filled with stored food and flowers are most fragrant or in early morning when they are filled with water. Remove leaves that will be under water in the arrangement.

To condition the flowers, place the stems in warm (100-110° F.) water and cover them with waxed paper or polyethylene plastic. Leave them in a dark room that is free from drafts and reasonably humid for several hours.

Treat flowers such as poinsettias, poppies, and dahlias by inserting the stem end in boiling water for 30 seconds before putting them in warm water. Use clean containers of suitable size and depth for conditioning your flowers.

**containers**

Select containers with the same care you use in selecting flowers. They need not be costly and usually simple styles are easiest to use. The lines of the container influence the lines of the arrangement. Beginning arrangers should choose two or three containers that can be used in several places in their homes.

**Size.** Select the containers large enough to hold the flowers without crowding the stems and deep enough to hold plenty of water. The size of the container should be in proper proportion to its setting.

**Shape.** Choose containers with simple outlines and good proportions. They should stand firmly without tipping and they should be easy to clean.

The types of flowers and foliage being used often are a guide to choosing a container of proper shape for a particular arrangement. The low, rectangular bowl will provide the beginner with an adequate container for many different arrangements.

**Texture.** Use light-appearing, smooth-textured containers for small delicate flowers. Choose sturdy, heavy-appearing containers for large, coarse flowers.

**Color.** Neutral or pastel-colored pottery containers with a subdued glaze are always suitable. If you choose a colored container in pottery, glass, or metal, select one with a dull finish or low lustre. The color may be the same as the flowers or a complementary one.
holders

Many types of flower holders are available. Different types are needed for different containers and arrangements.

Look for flower holders that keep flowers at the desired angles with minimum injury to the stems (oasis, snowpac, brass needlepoint frogs, etc.) and can be fastened in place to keep them from tipping or sliding when holding the flowers.

Equipment essential for flower arranging, in addition to containers and holders, includes a pair of wire cutters, a pair of shears, a sharp knife, soft wire, scotch tape, adhesive tape, leaf shine, and cotton swabs. Other items helpful in dramatizing many of your finished arrangements include bases, accessories, and background materials. While the possibilities are limitless, the beginner should choose a few that are most appropriate.

Bases include such things as trays, slabs, mats, and platforms in wood, metal, stone, glass, or fiber. Their use may improve balance, tie an accessory to the arrangement, and increase the overall height.

Accessories establish a mood, increase interest, or develop a theme for a particular occasion. Although appropriate figurines are most common, many other items can be used.

Background materials include screens, mats, and cloth pieces in various colors and textures. An arrangement is usually more effective against a plain background in harmonious colors. A neutral color is always safe but a complementary color is often more dramatic.

Keep equipment together so it will be available when you are ready to make an arrangement.
Arrangements may take three general forms—mass, line, or line-mass.

Mass arrangements are composed of a quantity of blooms crowded closely together in a heavy or large container. They may take the form of a circle, oval, triangle, or pyramid.

The line-mass arrangement is an American art form combining features of both the mass and line forms. It usually requires less material than the mass form and more than the line form. Some of the popular line-mass lines are vertical, horizontal, crescent, Hogarth curve or lazy S, and L-shaped.

Line arrangements, based on the ancient Japanese art, are quite formal and use flowers sparingly.

When deciding on design for your arrangement consider the occasion, where the arrangement will be placed, and the floral materials available. Limit the different kinds of flowers and foliages used. As you gain experience try more difficult arrangements using many colors and kinds of flowers.

To make a pleasing flower arrangement, you must have a definite, well-considered design or pattern. Carefully select each flower or flower cluster for color, stem length, size, and suitability so that when you put them in an arrangement they will relate pleasingly and form an attractive design.

**ELEMENTS OF DESIGN**

A pleasing flower arrangement follows the elements of design—scale, balance, unity, and harmony.

**Scale**

Scale involves the size relationship of all materials used in the arrangement, the container, and its ultimate location. The height of the arrangement varies with the container. As a rule the flowers and foliage should be 1½ times the height of an upright container or 1½ times the length of a low container.
For example, with a vase 8 inches tall or a low bowl 8 inches long, the height of the floral material above the container should be approximately 12 inches.

**Balance**

Balance gives a sense of stability. To produce a feeling of balance, the arrangement must be equally attractive on all sides. Balance is present in flower color, texture, and shape or mass.

Dark or intense colors appear heavy; pastel colors appear light. Keep most dark-colored flowers and foliage low in the arrangement.

Coarse-textured flowers seem heavier than fine-textured flowers of the same color. Place coarse-textured blossoms low in the arrangement.

A horizontal line is heavy, while a vertical line is light. Diagonal lines give an intermediate effect depending on their angles. A long line appears heavier than a short line.

Shape or mass changes weight. A spike-type flower is lighter than a round or rose-type flower.

Generally the highest point of the arrangement should be over the center of the container. If your arrangement is stable and solid and appears free from tipping and unevenness you have obtained correct balance.

The figurine (bird) at the right of the arrangement is not of sufficient size and weight to give stability.

**Unity and Harmony**

Any art object must look unified. Every flower and stem should look as if it belongs to the arrangement. Each unit of color, size, shape, and texture should bear a close relation to the others and to the whole. In other words, each part must contribute to the total arrangement. There should be harmony between the flowers and the container in color, shape, texture, and design.

Poor and good informal balance are shown with iris in these two arrangements. The same flowers have been used in both arrangements, but to better advantage in the one on the right.

Every arrangement should have one main color. You can use more than one or two colors in an arrangement, but arrangements with more colors are more difficult to make.

Most of us notice a lack of color harmony more than a lack of texture or shape harmony. However, both texture and shape harmony are important considerations.

**COLOR**

Undoubtedly most of the appeal of flowers is due to their color. Almost every color from the fiery red poinsettia at Christmas to the pure white lily at Easter, when used alone, will go well in your home. However, problems may arise when you try to use several colors together unless you have some understanding of color harmony.

The colors of nature as seen in the rainbow are: violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red in pure, unadulterated form. These are called hues. Any one of these may be combined with its neighbor on the color wheel in varying proportions to produce such hues as violet-blue and blue-violet or orange-red and red-orange. The hues in turn may be combined with black, white, or gray to form hundreds or even thou-
sands of different colors. A hue plus white gives a tint which is lighter than the original hue (pastels are tints). A hue plus black gives a shade which is darker than the original hue. A hue plus gray (black plus white) gives a tone which is more subdued or grayed than the original hue.

To use the colors of flowers, containers, and surroundings together harmoniously, the hues are usually shaped into a color wheel.

**Color Harmonies**

The more common color harmonies are monochromatic, analogous, complementary, split complement, triad, and polychromatic. Other color harmonies are sometimes used, but these are the most useful.

**Monochromatic**—one color on the color wheel and its tints, shades, and tones. For instance if red is chosen, one or more pinks and maroons might be used with it.

**Analogous**—neighboring colors on the wheel. Visualize a pie-shaped piece. You might choose yellow, orange-yellow, and green-yellow and their tints, shades and tones.

**Complementary**—opposite each other on the color wheel. These are sometimes called contrasting colors. They make a cheerful and lively arrangement. The red and green of Christmas is an excellent example of this type of harmony.

**Split complement**—variation of the complement harmony made by splitting one of the complements. For instance, instead of yellow and violet you might choose yellow, red-violet, and blue-violet. This is very effective when well done.

**Triad**—three colors equidistant on the wheel. A common example is red, yellow, and blue.

**Polychromatic**—many colors used together, presumably in an effective manner.

With each hue, its tints, shades, and tones can be used even though not mentioned in each harmony.

White and black which do not occur on the wheel and green which does are often used as neutrals to offset the other colors or prevent them from clashing. This is often done with natural green or treated foliage.

When two or more colors are used, they are usually not used in equal amounts. One color is dominant and the other subordinated to it.

As noted in the discussion on balance, warm colors such as yellow, orange, red, and shades are considered heavier than cool colors such as violet, blue, green, and tints although you would have difficulty showing this on the scales.

In general, the nearer a color comes to the hue the more stimulating and attention getting it is. Tints tend to be gay and cheerful, shades somber and depressing if used to excess, and tones calm and soothing.

Don’t forget that color extends from the actual arrangement to the immediate surroundings in the room. Harmonize the colors of the arrangement with the rug, draperies or curtains, furniture, and walls.
RHYTHM

Rhythm is flowing movement in a design. The motion starts at the focal point and carries the viewer's eye throughout the arrangement from one point of interest to another in natural and logical order. You can create rhythm by repeating shapes or by using a series of the same flower in graduated sizes.

FOCUS

We are usually attracted first to a single point in a good arrangement. This is called the focal point or center of interest. In flower arrangement the focal point may be blossoms, leaves, stems, or any other accents.

The focal point in a flower arrangement usually should be about one-third or less of the way up between the top of the container and the top of the arrangement. In naturalistic arrangements the focal point is where the imaginary vertical and horizontal lines meet.

FINISH

Good design does not guarantee a successful or finished arrangement. You must also give attention to the final details.

Use only quality materials. Flowers and foliage that are old, bruised, or damaged detract from the arrangement.

The way the frog or holder or any other mechanical detail is hidden also lends to the finish.

If the water surface in the bowl shows, keep it clean and free from pieces of leaves, petals, and other debris.

Cut flowers the night before they are needed and condition them by placing them in water that has been heated to 100°F (about bath temperature). Cover the flowers and let the water cool naturally. Warm water moves through the stem easier than cold.

Always wash the container with soap and water before using. This helps prevent or reduce the growth of algae, bacteria, and other stem-clogging organisms. Be sure both holder and container are clean and dry when using floral clay.

Cut stems on an angle to keep the ends from being sealed off if they should rest on the container bottom. Remove all foliage below water level. Add a commercial flower food such as Bloomlife or Flor-
alife to the water to give your arrangement a longer life. A little sugar is also helpful but don’t use aspirin.

After you have decided on a design and have conditioned your flowers, establish the main lines with the tallest or longest materials. Place the vertical and two side flowers first. Then establish the main point of interest or focal point.

The main stems of the flowers or foliages in the arrangement should not cross. Avoid crowding flowers. Over crowding destroys their individuality. Try to make them appear as natural as possible.

Add the filler material necessary to complete the arrangement and place the arrangement in the desired location. Add the base, accessory, and background.

Do not place flower arrangements near radiators or in a draft.

EXHIBITING ARRANGEMENTS

Don’t use the following flowers in arrangements as they do not stay fresh very long.

- Nicotiana (tobacco plant) moon flower
- Balsam (lady slipper) flax
- Four o’clock moss rose
- Wake robin (trillium) morning glory

Arrangements are judged on the basis of principles discussed. On a judging scorecard, for instance, color combination and design each count 25%. Distinction and originality count 20%. Relation to container, suitability of combination of material and condition of material each count 10%.

Always follow premium list or flower show schedule to the letter.

When entering an arrangement in a show, transportation is always a problem. It is best to carry your unassembled material to the show site and make your flower arrangement when you arrive. If this is not possible, the following suggestions may help you.

Use two pieces of saran wrap, plastic, or cellophane 2½ times the height of your arrangement. Place one piece flat on the other at right angles, set the arrangement on the area where the wrapping materials cross. Draw the ends up over the top, fold them down snugly to the flowers, and pin or staple them together.

Another method is to select a suitable box and cut a hole in it for the neck of the flower container. Fill the box with wadded newspapers to hold the container in place.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Audio-Visual Film Library at South Dakota State University has 2 excellent color films entitled, “Flower Arranging in the Home” and “Flower Arranging on a Budget.”

The University Library has a number of new books on flower arranging and related subjects. Ask your local librarian if interested. She can borrow books for you on an inter-library loan.

South Dakota has an active Garden Club Federation made up of many avid gardeners and excellent flower arrangers. Help from Garden Club members may be as near as your telephone as there are many clubs throughout the state. Local florists may also be willing to give assistance.