

## Flower Conditioning Tips by Linda Beutler

- ✿ Avoid using scissors or dull clippers to cut flower stems; scissors pinch the stem rather than giving a clean sharp cut.
- ✿ Re-cut *all* stems at an angle with a sharp knife after harvest; angling the cut exposes a greater area of the cut surface (cambium layer of plant) for water uptake.
- ✿ Immerse stems in deep water as soon as the sharp angled cut is made, a newly cut stem begins to dry over immediately, reducing tube (xylem) openings for water uptake.
- ✿ Allow flowers to draw water in a dark, cool place (certainly away from direct sun) prior to arranging, for several hours or overnight.
- ✿ Remove damaged and excessive foliage, and remove *any* foliage that will be under water once the flowers are arranged. A few flowers, such as lilacs and sunflowers, will last much longer if *all* of their foliage is removed.
- ✿ When harvesting, take a container of water with you, and plunge freshly cut flowers into it immediately. Re-cut all stems at an angle and edit foliage when completely finished harvesting.
- ✿ Whenever possible, harvest flowers in the early morning. The next best time to cut is in the early evening, just before and after sundown. Avoid mid-day harvesting.
- ✿ Rinse the fresh angled cut of stems that exude milky sap when harvested, to prevent fouling of the water.
- ✿ Split woody stems vertically with a clipper for 2 inches above the cut of tough woody stems during conditioning. When arranging this material in floral foam (Oasis), scrape off the outer bark for 1 to 2 inches above the stem, thus exposing the living cambium layer to fresh water. Hammering stems creates too much debris in the water.
- ✿ If you try using a new (to you) type of flower with preservative and the flower dies quickly, try it again in plain clean water. Some flowers, such as most members of the *Campanula* genus (bellflowers), will have a much longer cut life when displayed in vase arrangements without preservative.
- ✿ During conditioning and after arranging the flowers, change the water as often as necessary, and use a preservative where appropriate. When you notice the water is fouled, change it, re-cutting all stems before replacing them in the freshened water.
- ✿ Revitalize some flowers when they have been out of water and become limp (flaccid), by completely immersing them horizontally in warm water, after giving them a fresh angled cut. This works for tulips and roses, among others.

## Floral Preservative

Most cut flowers and foliage benefit from the use of a floral preservative in the water. The use of preservative should start immediately after harvest. On a commercial level preservative is used at each step on the flower's journey from the field or greenhouse to the retail florist. A good retail florist will include a packet of floral preservative with each cut flower bouquet or arrangement purchase.

Floral preservative benefits the flower in three main ways:

1. Helps the flower drink water faster. Often flowers are shipped dry, and the use of warm water with preservative helps the flower become fully rehydrated faster. Citric acid is typically the chemical included to accomplish this.
2. Provides nutrients so flowers in bud develop more normally. Nutrients help maintain healthy flower and foliage color. Sucrose (table sugar) is typically used for this purpose.
3. Keeps the water clear and free of bacteria. Decaying debris in the water of your vase or floral foam is often the cause of arrangements failing to last as they should. Most preservatives include Chlorine to act against microbes to keep the water from discoloring.

Most commercially prepared preservatives include the chemicals mentioned above: sugar, citric acid, and some form of chlorine. These compounds are either liquid or powder, and can be purchased under various brand names such as Chrysal, Floralife, Spring, or Rogard. All of these vary their formulas to give you the opportunity to buy more products (e.g. preservative blended especially for flowers that grow from bulbs). Usually separate types of preservative are merely a sales gimmick.

It is easy to blend your own preservative at home. Keep it on hand in the refrigerator or mix it for each use. A quick and easy source for citric acid and sugar, pre-blended, is any clear lemon flavored soft drink, such as 7-Up or Sprite made with cane sugar, not high fructose corn syrup. Do not use the diet forms of these drinks; flowers need sugar. Then add chlorine bleach, and you have a solution containing the three basic chemicals for a successful floral preservative. Use the following proportions:

For each Quart of water your vase holds add: 2  
Tablespoons of lemon soda  
1 Tablespoon of chlorine bleach.

If the arrangement is too large and complex to change the water easily, simply add 2-3 tablespoons of bleach to the water in the container, and in an hour or two the water will be clear again.

### Hellebores and Clematis

Hybrids in these genera respond well to alcohol (polypropyl, ethyl, and methyl) added to vase water at a rate of 2 tablespoons per quart. If you have a packet of florist's preservative add that, too, but it isn't necessary. The addition of alcohol (purchased at 70 or 90% concentration at a drugstore) adds dramatically to vase life for either.