Cut Flowers

By Jeanne Rose, UC Master Gardener

Do you enjoy cutting flowers from your garden for your home or to share with friends? Or perhaps you used to, but they seemed to start wilting almost as soon as you arranged them, so you don't anymore. Growing flowers for cutting is a hobby of mine that I really enjoy and over the years I've learned a few tips that will go a long way toward prolonging the vase life of cut flowers.

Early morning, before the temperature warms up and the plants have lost some of their moisture, is the absolute best time for cutting. If you can't cut your flowers then, the second best time is the evening after the temperature has dropped. When you go into the garden to cut your flowers, carry a container of lukewarm water with you. Select flowers with buds just beginning to open. For spike flowers like gladiolus, tuberoses or bells of Ireland, only the lowest bud or two should be open. Liatris is different from other spike flowers; it opens from the top first. Cut the stems long and put them in the water immediately without crowding them.

Do your cut roses get "droopy necks" soon after cutting? Flowers in most arrangements collapse early because they are unable to obtain enough water to keep them looking crisp and fresh. Stems are like drinking straws carrying water to the flowers. Here's a tip to maximize their water capacity. After your flowers are cut and brought inside, re-cut each stem while holding it under lukewarm water. If you re-cut without holding them under water, air bubbles can enter the stems and prevent the flow of water and nutrients to the flowers. Make sure to use a very sharp knife or clippers to avoid crushing the stems. Cut at a slight angle to expose more surface area to absorb moisture. Always strip any leaves that would be below the water level in your vase to prevent bacteria from growing and souring the water.

Flowers which exude sap when cut, like poppies and balloon flowers, should have the stems seared immediately after cutting by holding the cut end of the stem in a flame for a few seconds. The advice for handling flowers with woody stems (lilac, forsythia) used to be to crush the stems, but the latest research indicates they should be cut at an angle, under water, the same as other flowers.

Sometimes I use a commercial floral preservative, but most of the time I make my own vase solution. Since flowers are alive, they need food to keep them healthy even after cutting. Vase solutions contain sugar to help buds open and last longer, acid to improve water flow in the stem, and a preservative to reduce bacteria and fungi growth in the water. Here are a couple of university tested recipes:
#1 - Mix 1 part lemon-lime soda with 3 parts water and add $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon bleach per quart.
#2 - Mix 2 tablespoons lemon juice or bottled 'Real Lemon', 1 tablespoon sugar, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon bleach per quart of warm water.

If you don't use a vase solution, then rinse the vase and change the water daily. It is not recommended that you add aspirin to the water for cut flowers. Keep arrangements out of direct sun and away from all sources of warm, dry air. If possible move them to the coolest part of the house at night. Disinfect your vases after each use with one part household bleach and nine parts water.

Some easy-to-grow flowers that are good for cutting include alstroemeria, asters, bachelor buttons, bells of Ireland, carnations, chrysanthemums, gerbera daisies, liatris, peonies, scabiosa, sweet peas, and zinnias. Don't hesitate to experiment with various forms of greenery from your yard. Some long-lasting ones I have used in arrangements are asparagus fern, side shoots from grape canes, pittosporum and the leaves of blackberries, carrots, gerbera daisies and peonies. An exceptional, easy-to-grow, fern for cutting is the leatherleaf fern; it will remain in excellent condition in water for well over three weeks with little or no special care.

Put these helpful hints to work and you'll soon be enjoying your flower arrangements from your own garden.

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