



## DECORATING TIPS

# CONDITIONING AND USE OF PLANT MATERIALS

---

### **General Information and Suggestions**

If you carefully condition the greens and flowers you use, your efforts will be well rewarded. Properly conditioned plant materials remain fresh much longer.

Before cutting or purchasing plant materials, be aware of protected species in your area. Do not use these materials even if they are available from a local vendor. For example, the amount of the slow-growing princess pine needed to make one wreath can represent a substantial loss in its original habitat.

Always use clean containers. Household bleach will kill most bacteria and other organisms. Rinse the bleached containers well.

When cutting, carry pails of water for the cut materials. Do not crowd the plant materials.

If your exterior decorations will be in full sun, select your materials accordingly. Cones, pods, and nuts will fare far better than fruit on a wreath that faces the sun for much of the day. Balsam or spruce will not dry out and turn brown as quickly as white pine. If you live in an area where the temperatures are frequently below freezing, remember that most fruits are damaged and will change color when frozen.

In Williamsburg, squirrels and birds also enjoy our fruit wreaths!

### **Conditioning Foliage**

*Evergreens with woody stems* (holly, magnolia, pines, boxwood, firs, and cedar): When you return from cutting, recut the stems at an angle, slit up from the cut end about 2 inches with sharp clippers or a knife, and scrape off the lower bark to increase the plant's water intake.

Submerge your materials, if possible, in warm water in a sink, large pail, or even a bathtub. The next day, cut the pieces to the desired length with the stems cut at an angle, remove all of the foliage below the waterline, and stand the freshly cut stems upright in clean water mixed with floral preservative until ready to use. Spray with an antidesiccant to reduce moisture loss. After conditioning overnight, boxwood may be dried, dipped in liquid floor wax, and dried on news-papers. This effectively extends its life.

*Evergreens with nonwoody stems* (ivy, Alexandrian laurel, aucuba, and cleyera): When you return from cutting, recut the stems at an angle, remove all of the foliage below the water-line, and stand the materials

upright in water mixed with floral preservative. Leave overnight. After conditioning overnight, ivy may be dried, dipped in liquid floor wax, and dried on newspapers.

### **Conditioning Flowers**

*General:* After collecting or buying flowers, cut the stems at an angle and immediately put them into a clean container of warm water mixed with floral preservative at least one-half the length of the stems. If possible, choose flowers not yet fully opened. Remove all foliage below the waterline. Condition overnight or for at least 4 hours away from heat, sunlight, and drafts. Use hot water for wilting flowers and warm water for those with very soft stems. Mist the flowers frequently. A few flowers require special care:

*Tulips:* Recut the stems, remove the lower leaves, and roll 3 or 4 stems at a time in newspaper to keep the stems straight. Stand upright in a deep container of warm water overnight.

*Daffodils, hyacinths, and narcissi:* These flowers exude a slimy sap which can be damaging to other flowers, but they can be used safely with other flowers after conditioning. Condition separately from other flowers by standing upright in shallow water overnight or for at least 4 hours.

*Poinsettias, euphorbia, and other stems with milky, yellow, or colorless sap:* Cut each stem and immediately singe it in a candle flame for 10 to 15 seconds. Poinsettias treated this way usually will last for 12 hours out of water, or they can be singed and put into water.

### **Leaves Preserved in Glycerine**

Preserving leaves with glycerine is very simple, and the resulting colors add an interesting element to your decorations. The glycerine solution may be reused many times.

*Method:* Mix 1 part glycerine and 3 parts hot water. Select branches with well-shaped leaves free of insect damage or irregular hues. Prune if necessary and wash the foliage. Cut the stems on an angle and slit them with a knife. The stems should be less than 12 inches long for best results. Stand the stems in a jar of the glycerine solution deep enough to cover the bottom 3 to 4 inches of the stems. Check frequently to maintain the level of solution, adding more as necessary. Keep in a warm place with low light. Good air circulation is important. The leaves will change color as the solution is absorbed. Remove the materials from the solution when the leaves are all one color. The process will vary from 2 to 3 weeks. Early summer after the new growth has matured is the best time to preserve leaves in glycerine. The branches may be used as is, or large leaves may be used individually. The preserved materials may be stored and reused another year.

*Leaves most successfully treated:* magnolia, oak, laurel, rhododendron, other broad-leaved ever-greens, cedar sprigs (including berries), and beech. Experiment with different materials.

### **To Force Bulbs**

Daffodils, tulips, crocus, and grape hyacinth bulbs may all be forced, but allow about 4 months for a root

system to develop and the flowers to be produced. In the fall plant the bulbs in a pot of soil with the tips of the bulbs just visible on the surface. Water and place in a cool, dark area such as a garage. Do not let the pots dry out. After about 2 months, gradually bring the pots into the light and keep damp. The bulbs usually take an additional 6 weeks to flower. Paper-white narcissus bulbs can be grown easily in a shallow pot filled with pebbles. They are also striking planted in a tall glass cylinder which supports the stems as they grow. Start paper-white narcissus bulbs in a cool, dark area and introduce them gradually to light and warmer temperature when buds appear. Do not overwater.

### **Collecting Dried Materials**

Collect pods, nuts, cones, and other interesting dried materials throughout the year and store them with insect preventative. You will eventually have plenty of materials on hand when you wish to make a wreath for your door, a garland for your mantel, or a dried cone for your table. Bake acorns and other nuts found in the wild at 200°F for 2 hours to destroy any insects living within them.

### **Supplies**

It is a good idea to have on hand a supply of various gauges of floral and spool wire, fern pins, wired and unwired wooden floral picks, floral tapes and adhesives, sharp clippers, wreath forms, clothesline wire, wire cutters, instant floral foam (do not reuse), and a variety of sizes of chicken feeders, plastic liners, floral foam cages, and other holders. With these supplies, you will be ready to tackle most projects once your plant materials have been prepared.

This article was taken from Susan Hight Rountree's book *Entertaining Ideas From Williamsburg*