

Williamsburg®

DECORATING TIPS

PRESERVING PLANT MATERIALS

Much has been written on this subject, yet this brief overview will give you the basic information you need to preserve a variety of plant materials. You can dry many flowers, foliage, and herbs so they retain a nearly lifelike appearance, but you need to use the method that works best for the particular plant. You may need to experiment to find the most effective way to retain the color, shape, and, in many cases, fragrance of the plant materials you are preserving. Be warned, however, that some plant materials do not dry well no matter how they are treated. For this reason, cut more plant material than you think you will need.

FLOWERS IN SILICA GEL

Silica gel is easy to use and generally gives good results. It is particularly good for flowers with many petals such as roses. The beauty of this method is that the color, form, and texture of the preserved flower remain remarkably close to the original. Select blooms that are just opening and have firm petals. Pick them on a dry day after the dew has evaporated. The blooms must be completely moisture free before they are put in the silica gel. Flowers that dry well in silica gel include roses, marigolds, feverfew, zinnias, dahlias, peonies, tulips, and daisies.



Dry only one layer of the flower at a time. Flowers with flat blooms, such as daisies or marigolds, should be dried face down. Dry flowers such as roses or bell-shaped flowers face up.

Select a container with a lid that will hold the flowers you are preserving. You can use various types and sizes of containers, from cardboard boxes to cookie tins. Silica gel must be completely dry before it is used and should be kept in an airtight, covered container. After using it, dry the silica gel in the oven to restore its original color. It is important to always wear a mask when using silica gel.

When drying a rose or any bell-shaped flower, put 1 inch of silica gel over the bottom of the container. Remove all but 1 inch of the stem from the flower and insert a 3-inch piece of #28 gauge floral wire from the base of the stem through the center of the flower. Bend the end of the floral wire to form a slight hook and pull it back so the hook is hidden in the center of the flower. Bend the floral wire carefully at right angles to the base of the flower. Nestle the bloom into the silica gel in the container. Use a spoon to put a collar of silica gel around the outside of the bloom to support the petals, then gently sift some silica gel over the center of the flower. This procedure allows the flower to retain its original shape. Cover the flower to a depth of about 1/2 inch with silica gel and tightly cover the container.

Dry like flowers together so the drying time will be consistent for that particular container. Label the container with the contents and date to help you keep track of the time needed to thoroughly dry each batch of flowers. Experimentation will help you determine the amount of time it will take. Small flowers will only take 1 or 2 days to dry. Some fleshy flowers will take longer. Roses, for instance, will take between 4 and 7 days to dry. When you check to see whether the materials are dry, open the container and, wearing a mask, gently shake it to uncover the flowers. Remove one bloom with a slotted spoon. If it appears to be totally dry, gently pour the crystals back into the container. Remove flowers one at a time, straighten the floral wire, and insert it in a block of floral foam to protect the flower from rubbing against other blooms.

If any silica gel clings to the petals, remove it with a soft paintbrush. If a petal should fall off, reattach it by putting a dab of white glue on the base of the petal and another where the petals overlap to hold the fallen petal in place. The stems of most flowers you dry will be too short to use in arrangement. Make a longer stem by inserting the short stem of your flower into a dried stem of cockscomb, yarrow, delphinium, or other long, dried stems, including those of grasses or grains. If the stem of your flower is too wide to fit into a long, dried stem, connect the two with a 3-inch piece of #18 gauge floral wire.

FOLIAGE IN GLYCERIN

Preserve a variety of tree or shrub leaves with a glycerin solution. Many will turn a beautiful bronze, russet, or almost black color and become pliable, glossy, and long lasting as the solution is absorbed. This technique is particularly successful when used with foliage from magnolias and other broad-leafed trees such as bay, camellia, and beach. Experiment with other leaves including laurel, oak, and Russian olive.

You can purchase glycerin at pharmacies, in some craft stores, and from floral supply firms. To prepare the mixture, mix one part glycerin with



three parts hot water. Mix thoroughly until the solution is clear. Put 3 inches of the mixture into a glass jar so the liquid will be well above the cut ends of the stems.

Use only mature foliage. Prune each branch into the size and shape you plan to use for your arrangement. Check for imperfections and remove any leaves with insect damage. Clean the foliage in warm water. It is important to have the hot glycerin mixture ready before cutting the end. Cut the base of the stem on the diagonal, then make 1-inch vertical slits at the base, which will help with absorption of the solution.

To prevent the weight of the branches from tipping over the jar, put the jar into a pail and wedge it against one side of the pail with a brick or a stone. Watch the liquid level carefully during this period, replenishing when necessary as it is absorbed. Remove the foliage from the liquid when the top leaves become brown and glossy, usually in about 1 to 3 weeks.



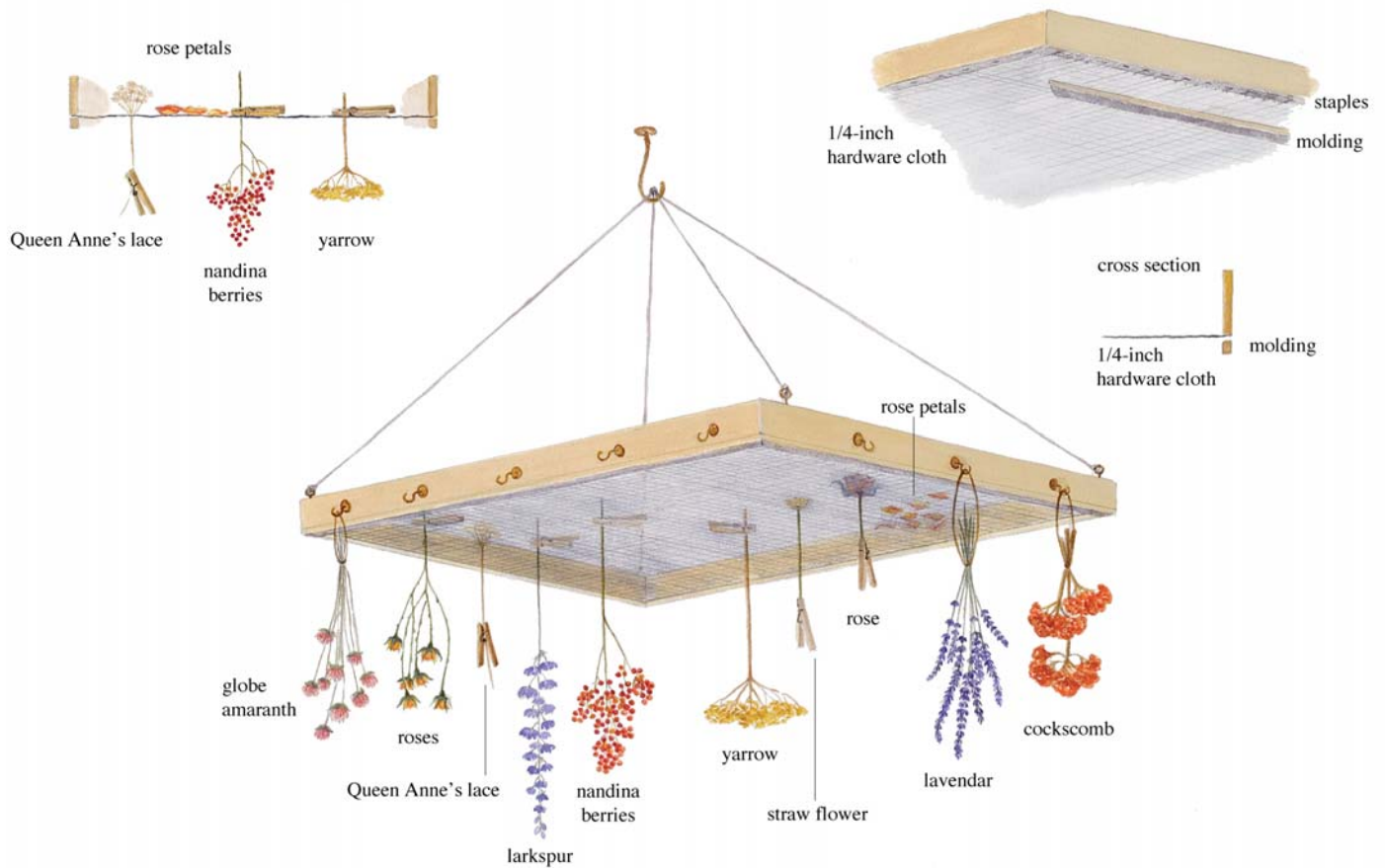
To preserve individual leaves, put them in a shallow dish and cover the leaves with the solution. They will change quickly. You can also treat ivy strands in this way. If foliage becomes dull looking after being preserved and used, gently dust and rub the leaves with mineral oil to return their shine.

AIR DRYING PLANT MATERIALS

Many flowers can be hung upside down and dried in small bunches. Others, such as Queen Anne's lace, do well when placed right side up on a drying tray with a clothespin holding the stem close to the wire mesh to keep the bloom from leaning. Other plant materials, many with interesting seed heads, pods, or cones, often dry naturally in the field.

Because many plant materials will dry bent if dried upright, remove the lower leaves and secure the flowers or foliage in small bunches with a rubber band. Hang the bunches upside down over a taut clothesline in a warm, dry, dark location near a heat source, in a dry attic, or along the sides of a drying rack. Do not crowd the bunches. Flowers and foliage that do well drying by this method include heather, pussy willow, globe amaranth, globe thistle, goldenrod, yarrow, tansy, salvia, cockscomb, lavender, baby's breath, strawflower, statice, mountain mint, love-in-a-mist, artemisia, and dock.

Most fresh herbs used in a wreath or a "faux" topiary will dry as the floral foam dries. To make these decorations, start with a wet floral foam wreath form, or a wet block of floral foam on a topiary base. Insert the plant materials at angles facing the same direction to achieve the best coverage. Because the drying process will shrink the plant materials, you will need to pack them tightly into the form. As the herbs dry, most remain fragrant and will cover the form because they are tightly packed. After the wreath



or topiary has dried, add strawflowers and other colorful dried blooms for accent or to fill in a hole. When starting with dried materials, use a dry floral foam form.

This article was taken from Susan Hight Rountree's book *From a Colonial Garden*.