

The Art of Gardening

by Laura Chaney, Rockwall County Master Gardener

While gardening may be an art form all its own, producing art from the garden can be as rewarding as the work put into the garden itself. Flower arranging, in its many forms, may be what comes to mind first. However, arrangements don't last long. What if you want art that is more permanent, or at the very least, longer lasting?

Flower arrangements that are more permanent require drying or preserving flowers and greenery. The easiest technique is to bundle a few stems together and hang them upside down indoors. While drying you'll want to keep the plant matter out of direct sunlight and in a place with good air circulation. Air circulation should be enough to prevent mold but not damage it as it dries. Avoid a closet or bathroom, but not in the path of a fan either. Bonus that while plants are drying, they can be décor on their own – very cottagecore! Fresh herbs can also be dried in this manner to be used in culinary art forms!

You'll find some flowers dry very well, keeping their original shape and color. Gomphrena and celosia are two of my favorites that you can plant by seed right now. Some artisans use silica powder to dry more fragile petaled flowers like orchids or peonies. There are several silica techniques in books or online that I am still experimenting with. Experimenting for me is a big part of the fun!

Another option for flowers that don't hold their shape dried is to press them. I am LOVING pressed pansies right now! To press flowers, you can use something like a heavy book but there are a few things to consider. First, flowers can leach color and stain book pages or make them stick together afterwards. Also, finding the page with the flowers can be difficult without the pages shifting as they're attached to the spine. Alternatively, you can create a flower press relatively easily. Two pieces of wood with alternating cardboard and printer paper layered between is a good start. Try drilling holes in each corner of the wood pieces, thread bolts with washers and wingnuts to tighten the stack and keep it all together (and able to be moved) or place a heavy object on top of the stack in one place. Flower presses of all sizes are also available at many retailers.

After you have pressed or dried flowers – what to do with them? Arrange and glue pressed flowers onto notecards, bookmarks or on the sides of pillar candles. Keep them pressed in a floating window frame. Dried flowers can be made into arrangements or put into an open frame, taking the place of a canvas. Weave them into a garland or a flower crown before drying. Let your creativity shine!

Finally, I would be remiss talking about art techniques from the garden without talking about natural dyes. Some of the most beautiful dyes can be achieved with plant matter and the colors are often not what you'd expect! For example, did you know black beans can produce shades from a delicate periwinkle to a stormy blue? Many natural dyes are available as scraps from dinner or at the grocery store. Examples are black beans, onion skins, or avocado pits. One plant that you can grow in your garden is Indigo - yes, the kind that dyes your jeans! Japanese Indigo (*Pericaria tinctoria*) does well in our hot Texas summers, though to produce dye, they do require more water than many plants. Madder root (*Rubia tinctorum*) produces a wonderful variety of reds, also thrives in Texas as long as it has good soil drainage and can be grown and overwintered in containers. Finally, Weld (*Reseda luteola*) known for creating brilliant shades of yellow, is a plant that grows a lot like a weed. Unlike the first two, this plant thrives at temperatures between 60 and 75 degrees. Planted in the fall, it will survive our winters and be

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ready for an early spring harvest. With these 3 primary color plants, you'll be able to mix and overdye to create a wide range of colors, just reference your color wheel!

If you would like to learn more about the art forms covered here and participate in hands-on fun, please join me and the Rockwall County Master Gardeners at Pop Up In The Plaza, in San Jacinto Plaza, during the Founders Day Celebrations on Saturday May 17th, from 11am to 3pm.



Photo By: Lisa Johnson RCMGA



Photo By: Stacie White RCMGA