

# Everlasting Beauty

## Drying Garden Materials for Beautiful Arrangements

STORY BY HOPE WRIGHT



*Photo courtesy of Hope Wright.*

**Use your garden's bountiful harvest to create beautiful wreaths and holiday decorations this season. This wreath features all dried material, including yarrow, sunflowers, hydrangea, bittersweet, and oranges.**

**A**s a floral designer, my interest in gardening has expanded to include gathering and preserving plant material for everlasting arrangements and wreaths. This way you can enjoy the beauty of your plants year round.

The key to drying flowers is to pick them at the perfect time in their growth cycle. Unfortunately, there are no hard-and-fast rules for timing. As always, research and experience is the best teacher.

You can begin looking for materials to harvest as early as February. Some things, like cattails, thistles, and grasses, must be picked early in their cycle. If it dries it will go to seed and produce dandelion-like fluff.

I collect poppy pods while still green for use in fresh arrangements (until the tiny black seeds begin to drop). After that, put your pods in a loose paper bag, bundle the top, and hang it upside down. Poppy pods' green color doesn't last very long, but you will be rewarded with wonderful pods and hundreds of seeds for your garden.

Other interesting items include red- and yellow-twig dogwoods. Their colors don't last long after cutting, but they are wonderful for fall and holiday designs. Remember, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I love the look of materials such as grandiflora magnolia leaves turning a rich chestnut color in a holiday wreath or centerpiece.

When planning your arrangement, remember that colorful flowers usually dry darker, with red roses becoming black and bright red coxcomb turning a beautiful burgundy. Most of the colors are subtle and very appealing as long as you're prepared for the change.


## Drying Methods

**Air Drying.** I prefer the air-drying method. Pick flowers after the dew dries but before the sun “zaps” their energy. Hang them upside down in small bunches in a dry location. Wait a few weeks until they’re completely dry to the ends of the stems. A short list of suitable air-drying plants includes lavender, larkspur, roses, zinnias, salvia, strawflowers, yarrow, coxcomb and herbs.

**Drying After Arranged.** Pussywillows and other similar materials can dry in arrangements or wreaths with very little breakage. Cut pussywillows when approximately three-fourths of the catkins have appeared. Wait much longer and the pollen that forms will ruin your efforts. Arrange stems while still pliable, before the catkins dry. Similar materials include oak and magnolia leaves, nigella pods and branches like birch or curly willow. Nandina berries are another favorite that require little special attention.

**Drying on the Plant.** For hydrangeas, don’t harvest blooms until they’re dry to the touch on the bush. Like pussywillow, arrange hydrangea within a few days of cutting and place in a permanent location. The PeeGee variety yields excellent dried results.

**Drying Agents.** Using silica gel is another drying method. Choose an airtight container and gently bury flowers in the sand-like silica for several weeks to wick away moisture. This is not my favorite method, however, because materials quickly fade and lose their shape unless your setting is completely climate-controlled. Woody stems can be dried in a mixture of glycerin and dye, but color bleeding may occur, and it can be difficult to deal with dye running from “preserved” eucalyptus!

This is just an abbreviated lesson on drying; the discoveries and the possibilities are endless. Go ahead—add that magnolia to your garden and (eventually) to your wreaths, and sprinkle some nigella and poppy seeds this spring to be rewarded first with beautiful flowers and then with pods. With some experimentation, you, too, will be drawn into the world of everlastings. 

*Hope Wright of Brevard, N.C., creates visual displays, hosts informal floral design and gardening workshops and enjoys “cutting privileges” at Biltmore Estate where she is a floral design specialist at A Gardener’s Place, the estate garden shop.*

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