



Cutting Gardens – Growing a Bouquet

If you love having fresh flowers inside your home as well as out in your garden, perhaps you should consider setting aside a garden bed dedicated to providing you with plenty of cut flowers throughout the growing season. The flowers you choose for your cutting garden will be a unique reflection of you! Plan and plant your own cutting garden so that you will have an ample supply of just the right blooms to fill your home without emptying your outdoor space.

become your own favorite florist

- Spend some time researching flower images before even thinking of selecting seeds or plants. What immediately catches your eye and draws your attention? Is it a flower's color, shape, texture or some combination of the three? Keep these parameters in mind when you start making lists of flowers you want to grow in your cutting garden.
- You will probably find that some of the flowers that appeal to you may be difficult to grow or hard to find. Don't give up! Try to isolate the qualities you loved and replicate them in the color, shape or texture of a more accessible plant. Look over our *Cutting Garden Plant List* to find flowers that fit the bill. Now it's time to go shopping – for seeds and/or plants.
- Take fabric samples, paint chips or photos with you to help you choose for color. Step back and look at the shape of the flower and the habit of the stems and foliage – imagine them in different types of vases and containers. Keep an eye out for variety in texture (don't forget plants with unusual foliage!) so your arrangements won't get stuck in a rut. Ask questions!
- Don't forget to sniff! Fragrant flowers can provide your home with a signature scent that you are growing yourself.
- Consider starting the bulk of your annual flowers from seed or buying in 6-packs. With more plants, you'll be able to set them out more densely which will encourage taller stems and discourage weeds. And, of course, you'll get more blooms!
- Perennial flowers and shrubs should not be crowded, however. They are long term investments and need appropriate space.

site location : incorporated or dedicated?

- Many gardeners simply **incorporate** their cutting garden plants into existing gardens, especially when space is at a premium.
- The disadvantage with this plan is the mass of plain old green when all the flowers have been plucked. In an existing garden you must plant multiples each flower so you can cut what you want without leaving obvious holes in the garden.
- If you are looking for spectacular blooms that are plentiful enough to harvest extras, you must pay close attention to soil fertility and ample water. It may also help to mark specific plants to cut from so that you don't unintentionally over harvest.
- Adding flowers to your herb or vegetable gardens is a great option, since these are "working" rather than display gardens.
- The best location for a **dedicated** cutting garden is probably not the focal point of your yard, but somewhere off to the side so your view isn't spoiled by a lack of blossoms.
- Most perennial and annual plants for cutting gardens prefer full sun which means at least six hours of direct sunlight. Don't forget, however, that there are plenty shade-loving plants which will provide flowers and foliage for your arrangements.
- The actual layout and care of a dedicated cutting garden will be very similar to a vegetable garden. You will want a place you can easily walk around to reach in to weed and harvest. The surrounding paths need to be wide enough for working space.
- Plant flowering shrubs at the north end so as to not shade out the other plants, then lay out rows of perennials grouped by expected height. Leave ample space to fill in each year with annuals by height.
- As with any garden, prepare the bed by having a soil test and adding appropriate amendments. Add a high quality compost such as *Dr. Earth Motherland*, and *Turface* for great drainage. Regular watering is essential to flowering, so investing in drip irrigation is a good idea. Once your plants are somewhat established, a 2" layer of mulch will also be helpful.

cutting garden culture

- Water deeply and avoid overhead watering which can discolor and damage flowers. If plants with similar needs are grouped together, drip irrigation can be put on a timer.
- Amend the bed in spring with a bloom-boosting, high phosphate fertilizer such as *Espoma FlowerTone 3-4-5*. It is also high in magnesium, which helps strengthen cell walls (think sturdy stems!) and improves plants' uptake of nitrogen, phosphorus and sulfur, a key element of plant growth. Continue to feed through the season by watering once a month with a liquid fertilizer such as *Nature's Source 10-4-3*.
- Since you will be encouraging long straight stems and large blossoms, staking early in the growing season is a good idea. Thin bamboo stakes and flexible ties work best. A more permanent, adjustable system such as *Peacock* is best for your perennials.
- **Disbudding** is the early removal of all lateral bloom buds, a practice that allows the plant to send nutrients to the top bud that remains in order to gain a larger central bloom. Dahlias, carnations, roses, peonies and other long-stemmed flowers are good candidates. The best time to disbud is before the buds show any color and are smaller than a pea.
- **Pinching** is a pruning technique that helps promote bushier plants which will then produce more blooms. Find the tiny new leaves at the top of the stem and either literally pinch out with your finger tips or use a small scissors to remove them. The older leaves will form the new branches. Asters, chrysanthemums, fuchsia, snapdragons, and salvias respond well to pinching.
- **Deadheading** is also very important for flower production. If you keep your annuals from going to seed they will continue flowering. This also works to a certain extent with perennials, though most perennials have a shorter flowering period.
- Many plants such as coreopsis, salvia, nepeta, and hardy geraniums, appreciate a **mid-season shearing** to prompt new growth and rebloom. Don't be afraid to ask for tips about all the plants you are choosing before you buy!
- Remember to pick often – the more flowers you pick, the more the plant will produce! You can never have too many flowers! Don't forget that a vase of flowers makes a wonderful gift, especially for someone with no garden or outside space – why not share your bounty at a nearby senior center, homeless shelter or clinic?

...and now the bouquet!

- The key to a long-lasting flower arrangement is cutting the flowers and foliage plants at their peak and making sure they receive the maximum amount of water as quickly as possible after cutting.
- This means you should cut the flowers in the early morning, not when the sun is high. Carry a bucket of tepid water with you out to the garden to place the flowers in immediately – as soon as they are cut!
- Choose flowers that are about ½ to ⅔ open. Snipping above a node or dormant bud will spur new blooms.
- Re-cut the stems on a slant to improve water uptake. Remove the lowest foliage to help prevent bacterial growth.
- Condition the flowers by resting the stems in bucket of floral preservative solution (see below) in a dark, cool place for two to three hours before you begin arranging. This conditioning period will extend the flower's vase-life up to 200%.
- Some types of plants require another step before conditioning:
 - Oozing stems need to be seared by being held over a flame. This seals the cut and allows the flower to take up water.
 - Woody stems of shrubs or roses, for instance, may be slit or cut vertically to enable water uptake.
 - Weak-stemmed flowers should be wrapped in newspaper after cutting, and then placed in water.
 - For hollow-stemmed flowers such as dahlias or mignonette, invert one at a time, fill stems with water, stop up the end with a fingertip, holding on as you place it back in the water.
- Arrange your conditioned flowers in a vase of warm (110°) floral preservative solution. Display in a well-ventilated, cool place.
- Change the water every couple of days. If you use a commercial floral preservative, make sure to follow package directions as incorrectly measured preservatives can do more harm than good. Or try one of these recipes from MSU florist Tim Latimer:
 - 2 cups 7-up + 2 cups water + 1 tsp bleach;
 - 4 cups water + 2 Tbsp sugar + 2 Tbsp lemon juice + 1 tsp bleach; or
 - 4 cups water + 2 Tbsp sugar + 2 Tbsp vinegar + 1 tsp bleach.