

Everlastings

Wouldn't it be nice if you could plant flowers in the spring and enjoy their beauty for years? Well you can if you plant everlastings. Everlastings are those plants which retain their shape and color long after they have been picked and dried. And a bonus, is they aren't difficult to grow or dry.

Everlastings differ from other flowers even during their life -- most possess very little moisture in the flowers, and feel, dry or papery to the touch, before they have been dried. Before the availability of cut flowers year-round, everlastings were the only alternative for flowers in our homes.

Everlastings have been around since ancient times, and were popular through the ages. Then with the addition of silk or artificial flowers their popularity waned. But for the past two decades, their popularity has increased. Garden catalogs, magazines and crafters are all selling wreaths, swags, and other dried flower materials. As a result, everlastings are being imported on a large scale from Holland, Australia and other countries. Local growers are incorporating them into their fields, and you can find a good supply at local craft stores, and farmers markets.

Types

Everlastings can be grown in your yard, and it may surprise you that some of the plants you are already growing are everlastings. Annual everlasting flowers include: ageratum, calendula, celosia (cockscomb), bachelor's buttons (Centaurea), dusty miller, larkspur, gomphrena (globe amaranth), strawflower (Helichrysum), statice, scabiosa and basil flowers. Marigolds and salvia can also be used as everlastings, but since they do retain more natural moisture, they are trickier to do. They should be picked just before maturity and hung to dry immediately after in a very warm, dry area with good ventilation. They will shrink half their natural size after drying.

Perennial plants used as everlastings include: yarrow, allium flowers (both chives and garlic), armeria (true thrift), butterfly weed, artemisia, astilbe, thistles, gaillardia, baby's breath, hydrangea, lavender, liatris, money plant or lunaria (actually this is a biennial, but it freely reseeds), monarda, roses, perennial salvias, santolina, and sedum. Most herbs are included in the everlastings, although some hold up better or are more attractive than others. The most commonly used herbs include: rosemary, mints, oregano, and lavender. There are also many grasses, both perennials and annuals whose seed heads are fabulous everlastings.

Flowers aren't the only part of the plant that is used. Gaillardia spent flower heads -- those fuzzy round seed heads are great additions, as are the leaves of dusty miller and artemesia. Foliage is often the backdrop for the wreaths, with the blooms and seed pods the decorations.

Harvesting & Drying

Now that you know what they are, how do you harvest and or dry them? There is no simple answer for each flower. Some flowers are picked when they are mature, others must be picked prior to maturity. Weather conditions play a part, both in humidity and soil moisture. But there are some general rules. Everlastings can be roughly broken down into a few categories.

The first category applies to daisy-like and spiked flowers which open after they are picked. They must be picked as the bud opens its first set of petals. The flowers will continue to open during drying. These include the strawflowers, gomphrena, bachelor's buttons, alliums, and thistles.

The second category includes the flowers that should be picked as the center bud is almost totally developed. If the flower is picked too early, they won't open enough and you won't get good color development. If you pick too late, the flower will shatter. These include ageratum, yarrow, armeria, butterfly weed, baby's breath, santolina, and sedum.

The other category concerns spike flowers or racemes which are born on a central stem and have sequentially opening flowers, either from the bottom or the top. The object is to pick them when as many side spikes and therefore color is open. Spikes that open from the bottom up should be picked when approximately two-thirds of the spike is developed, but before the bottom flowers begin to fade. Spikes that open from the top down, would be picked just before the flowers at the top start fading. Spike flowers include: larkspur, statice, salvia, basil, astilbe, lavender, liatris and veronica.

Plants that have extra moisture in them, require quick drying. Pick, hang and dry plants include Calendula, celosia, and marigold. Some flowers practically dry on the plant, such as hydrangeas.

Roses can be picked at various stages, depending on how you plan to use them. If air drying, pick them when they are in the bud stage or just slightly open. Never pick them fully open, or they will fall apart.

As with any new hobby, trial and error will give you more information. Finding the right location to dry your flowers may also take some experimentation.

Before you pick your flowers, try to decide on their future use. If you just need small flowers for a wreath or craft, cut a small stem. If you plan to arrange them in flower arrangements or large swags, you may need a longer stem. The longer the stem and the more leaves attached to it, the longer your drying time. Some stems are sturdy after drying, while others need some reinforcement with florists wire.

How Long it Takes

How long it takes to dry everlastings depends on the species and the location you are drying them. Temperature and humidity play a big role, as does outside weather conditions. It is not a great idea to harvest after a torrential rain. A goal is to dry your flowers as quickly as you can. The quicker they dry, the more you can expect to preserve the color and shape of the flower. The ideal drying environment is low humidity, good air circulation, limited light and warm temperatures. If there is high humidity, the flowers may mildew rather than dry.

There are various methods for drying flowers. By far, the easiest method is grouping your flowers in bunches and hanging them upside down to dry. This will keep the flower heads together while they dry. Consider a vase of flowers that begins to dry, the flower heads drop and petals fall down when they stand upright during drying.

As flowers dry, the stems lose moisture and shrink. Be sure to adjust your string or use a rubber band to tie your bundles together to accommodate this shrinkage. Silica gel, oven drying and pressing flowers are all used to preserve flowers, but the flowers we have been discussing, dry nicely with the tie and hang method.

Once they are dry, use them in wreaths, arrangements or other decorations. If you can't use them all at once, continue to let them hang, until they are needed. Hanging bundles are a nice decoration all unto themselves.

When you harvest has a lot to do with the bloom period of the plants you are growing. With annual everlastings, be sure to get them up before the first frost. Some plants, such as gomphrena can be harvested as a whole plant late in the season. Fall is also a great time to scavenge for dry materials from the wild. Make sure you have the property owners permission to harvest before you go collecting.

Flowers have always added something special to a home. There is a language of flowers, and whether fresh cut or dried, they are a wonderful addition. By growing and/ or using everlastings, we can use "real" flowers and continue to enjoy them for a long period of time.