

episode 47 show notes and advice

On today's Christmas Eve podcast, Sarah and Arthur thought they would share all their knowledge and tips so your cut flowers can last for as long as possible.

They give advice on how to best condition flowers so now over Christmas, in our heated houses, you can maximise the beauty and vase life of what you've bought, or picked, to decorate your house.

This episode has absolutely everything they can think of to make your flowers look wonderful and last. These tips will help you now, but are of course relevant throughout the year.

In this episode, discover:

- Arthur's top tip – think a season ahead for drying flowers and seedheads.
- Sarah's fool proof order to follow when picking flowers for the vase.
- Learn how to condition cut flowers and why you need to know the 5 S's.
- Arthur shares a glamorous centrepiece with amaryllis.
- Sarah's homemade flower preservative recipe.
- What flowers Sarah and Arthur will buy from a shop now, and the ones they'll avoid.

Episode 47 advice sheet

Arthur's top tip

At this time of year Arthur is surrounded by golden allium seedheads. His top tip is to try and think about drying seedheads all through the year. Look at the garden and, as things are going over, have in mind what could be gorgeous inside when there is nothing much to pick in the garden.

With alliums, don't let the wind and cold destroy them, pick as soon as they start to fade from jewel green to that yellow tumbleweed colour. Bring inside and put them all in a box to dry somewhere light and airy, not too hot, cold or damp.

Get them out at Christmas and they make the most gorgeous decorations. Giant Allium schubertii suspended from the ceiling look stunning as they are, you don't even have to spray gold or silver, leave them natural, maybe hang some super-light decorations on the end of each seed frond.

Sarah's top tip

Remember the five S's

Submerge – Sear – Stake – Sterilise – Sugar syrup (for sweet peas)

1. Submerging

Sarah and Arthur have just finished a tour of workshops and courses. They both brought hydrangeas to use for arrangements which sometimes arrived at venues dehydrated, looked like old rags.

Arthur recalls one white hydrangea that looked like a white dishcloth. Sarah said put it in the sink. Arthur duly filled a bucket with cold water, submerged it with all the hydrangeas, and left it overnight. In the morning, they all looked wonderful, especially the sad hydrangea which had become a plumped up, gorgeous white flower again. With hydrangeas, what looks like the flower petals are actually bracts – enlarged leaves which will suck up water. The flower is a small triangle in the middle of these bracts (poinsettia also have colourful bracts that look like flower petals).

Sarah discovered this technique years ago on a peony photoshoot for [House & Garden](#). She was at [Kelways nursery](#) in Somerset and had picked lots of peonies when the photographer Jonathan Buckley, Sarah's friend and long-time collaborator, called to say he was sick and couldn't come. Sarah didn't know what to do with the peonies. She got home and was slightly panicking, some of the peonies were already flopping over and she wasn't sure they would survive until the shoot could go ahead. She chucked them all in the bath, fully submerged in water. Later that day when she checked, they had all perked up to look brand new. She arranged them all in vases, they were totally fine for the rescheduled shoot, and went on to last for two weeks.

If you have peonies or hydrangeas that are looking past it, submerge them in cool water, floating as if they are in a Pre-Raphaelite painting, they will perk up and be perfect. Submerging won't affect their colour and this technique is fine for white flowers too. Both these plants have tough cuticles, a waxy film that covers leaves, and won't go brown in water. Sarah puts them overnight in a bath, even if they are not floppy, as it helps these flowers last much longer in the vase.

2. Searing

This is the S that Sarah does more than any other. Searing has a miraculous effect on vase life. Even if they have flopped already, many flowers will make a total recovery after searing. Sear stems by dipping the bottom 10% of the stem in boiling water, Sarah uses a mug with about 2 inches of boiling water. She will plunge the stem in and count how many seconds according to the texture of the stem:

5 seconds for a bluebell

10 seconds for cerinthe (or honeywort)

20 seconds for a more woody stem like a rose

30 seconds for something really woody like blossom, or leafy like cotinus.

Then straight back into a deep bucket of cold water.

The quantity of flowers she sears depends on the season. In spring, she sears 75% of what she picks, apart from bulbs which don't need searing. This is because most flowers are recently grown in spring and a bit floppy. By autumn, plants have laid down more lignin in their cell walls, so are tougher, and Sarah only sears 25% of what she picks, maybe late-flowering roses or annuals like late-sown cerinthe.

Searing transforms everything in the garden into excellent cut flowers – even daisies or buttercups can be seared. The key thing is to plunge them straight into cold water after searing, a bit like you plunge peas or spinach into cold water after blanching to help keep the bright green colour.

3. Staking

At Christmas, Arthur often buys a bunch of amaryllis from the supermarket or flower shop, looking for stems still tight in bud - open petals bruise so easily and won't do well on the bus home. The heat of a room will make them open within two days. Amaryllis have hollow, delicate stems that will curl up, like a packet of Christmas wotsits, and eventually split. To stop this from happening Arthur recommends doing two things:

Stake with a bamboo cane, placed internally up the middle of the hollow stem. This helps the amaryllis stay tall and not break

Secure with an elastic band to prevent the stem from crinkling up

Do this and they will last almost two weeks in the vase. They are a bit like lilies, by the time the first flower is fading there is another bud opening up. A bunch of amaryllis is a bit indulgent but if you add some branches you don't need many to create a centrepiece. Entwine copper wire lights all through it and you'll have a very glamorous arrangement for about £15.

The third S is staking – some flowers with hollow stems will get extra support with a stake placed internally up the stem.

4. Sterilising

Sarah is a seasonal garden grower and picker but, at Christmas, she does love a bunch of lilies. She has memories of her aunt's house at Christmas full of hyacinths and lilies. Sarah would walk down from her bedroom and remembers the citrusy natural perfume from the flowers, freesias too.

You can get for good value lilies between Christmas and New Year. Sarah doesn't sear them, as lilies are bulbs, but as each flower opens, she does remove the anthers. Every morning and evening she'll check and pull off any anthers. This way she is sterilising the flower which will prolong flowering. For some lilies like the big white Lily 'Casablanca' this can extend vase life by 3 days, so can double the vase life of 5-10 lilies.

5. Sugar syrup for sweet peas

Sarah has found in her trials at Perch Hill that sugar syrup prolongs the vase life of sweet peas by 24-48 hours. In sweet pea season, make sugar syrup, let it cool and put in a squeeze bottle, store in the fridge and add a little zap into jugs in June and July.

What flowers are ok to buy?

At this time of year, especially over the festive period, most of us will end up buying flowers at some point. There isn't much to be picking now, also not all of us have cutting patches in our gardens or conservatories full of forced flowers.

Sarah and Arthur discuss the flowers they are likely to buy and how they would rather buy flowers from Holland over those that have been flown in from Kenya or Australia, or that need intensive production to grow.

Sarah goes for flowers that would naturally be in season in 6-8 weeks time. At Christmas this means things that would be in flower naturally in early March. It is likely they don't need as many resources to produce.

- Anemone coronaria - vase life of 10 days, cut stem ends and change flower water regularly.

- Freesias - flower naturally in rocky areas in South Africa, and the Mediterranean, Sarah has seen them wild in Crete (possibly garden escapees). They are early-flowering, late February/early March.
- Paperwhite narcissi – good value, last for ages.

Some flowers can also be held back – put nerines in the fridge and they can be held back 4-6 weeks or grown in a cold environment so come into flower later.

While Sarah loves flowering euphorbia she feels they need too much heat to pump into flower. Arthur draws the line at roses during the winter which are flown in from Kenya or Australia. See above for Arthur's pick – amaryllis.

Sarah's flower preservative solution

The sachets that come with flowers you buy in the shop or supermarket contain flower food and stuff to stop bacterial reproduction.

Adding sugar to water will feed bacterial growth, which creates slime, stopping the flower from absorbing water so then it dies. Sarah doesn't recommend sugar syrup for flowers, apart from sweet peas. You need something to decrease bacterial reproduction. Sarah makes her own:

- 5 tbsp clear distilled vinegar in 2L of water

There is also an old wives tale that adding a copper coin to a vase will help the flowers last longer. Copper changes the PH of water to make it more acidic which is another route to decrease bacterial production. Flat lemonade should have the same effect, making a weak carbonic acid.

Sarah doesn't do this every day but over Christmas, with all the heating and light in rooms, she will use some sort of flower preservative.

Give your flowers a break and lots to drink

Don't forget to top up your vases – central heating means lots of water evaporation. Morning and night top up with water – seems obvious but remember to do this.

Giving flowers a break from heat will also extend their vase life. Put them out overnight on a doorstep or cool room if not frosty – there is no point them sitting in a warm room overnight.

When picking flowers follow this order:

- Pick
- Condition – remember the 5 Ss
 - Submerge
 - Sear
 - Stake
 - Sterilise
 - Sugar syrup for sweet peas
- Rest in cool water ideally in the dark overnight
- Arrange

Do not just pick and plonk your flowers in a vase – they will flop. By picking, conditioning, resting and then arranging, things will really last their maximum as a cut flower and will often last as long as if in the garden, so you are not stealing the view.

Arthur adds one more S – stripping

Remove all the foliage under the waterline – it will just decompose and cause bacterial growth. That's everything Sarah and Arthur can think of. Hopefully these tips will make your flowers last all the way from Christmas until New Year.

Merry Christmas!