Conditioning plant material

Conditioning is the careful treatment of fresh cut, living, plant material in order to preserve freshness and to prolong its life by various means so that stems take up water more easily.

The nature of the plant determines which method has to be used, e.g. woody, hard, soft, milky or hollow stems. Remove lower leaves which will decay if left under water in the container.

Shop bought flowers should have been conditioned but will still benefit having their stems re cut and given a drink for a minimum of 2 hours.

Flowers

- **soft stems** cut 1" of stem, preferably under water
- **hard & woody stems** cut stem, scrape about 2" of bark
- **hollow stems** fill with water with the aid of a funnel or baster. Plug with cotton wool. This will act as a wick in water.
- **milky stems** singe with a match or flame until the end is blackened (only a few seconds).

This method is essential if stem oozes a milky fluid e.g. euphorbia. Repeat if stem cut again.
The effect is similar to boiling. It prevents fluid from coagulating and stops further fluid from leaking out.

Once the stems have been prepared place in deep tepid water for a minimum of 2 hours in a cool, draft free area although flowers with hairy stems e.g. Gerbera, should be placed in shallow water.

- **Bulbous Stems** (e.g. Daffodil, Tulip, Bluebell, Hyacinth)
  Water absorption is through the green part of the stem, so any white area should be removed by cutting at an angle.
  Note - Daffodil stems exude a poisonous sap when cut. This will shorten the life of other flowers if conditioned in the same water. They should be arranged separately if in water, but can be arranged together with other flowers if in floral foam.

Foliage

Foliage, especially evergreen, is often dusty and dirty. Swish it through a bowl of tepid water containing a small squeeze of washing up liquid, then rinse in clear water.

Foliage may be conditioned by submerging in water for a minimum of 2 hours as leaves are able to take up water through their surface tissue.

However there are certain exceptions

- **grey foliage** loses its greyness as the small hairs become waterlogged. Cut stems and stand in shallow, tepid water.
- **variegated foliage** can turn brown and waterlogged if submerged
- **new season**, tender growth can become brown and waterlogged if submerged

Wilting

Although plant material may be well conditioned it can still wilt through lack of water in the stem. This is usually because of an air lock which causes the stem to flop. Re-cut the stem and select method of increasing water content:

- float or submerge the flower or stem horizontally in water for approximately 2 hours
- place stem end in 1" boiling water and allow to cool
- immerse flower head in water for approximately 2 hours
- place cut stem in tall container e.g. milk bottle with warm water. This allows the stem to take in water through its entire length

Aftercare

However well conditioning before arranging, cut plant material will wilt or die more quickly if subjected to

- **Lack of water** – containers and water retaining foam should be topped up daily
- **Heat** - avoid full sun, fire, radiators
- **Dry atmosphere** - central heating is usually the cause. A frequent atomising spray will help
- **Draughts** - they cause loss of water

Cleanliness helps to prolong the life of cut plant material. Cutters should be kept clean and sharp. Containers and other sundries should be washed in water containing a little disinfectant and dried before storing.

Special cut flower feed can be added to water.
Floral foam can be soaked in this mixture, although some foams have initial supply 'built in'.