



WHEN YOUR GARDEN'S ABLOOM

I always try to have fresh flowers in my house. In the dead of winter, it's a challenge and I often have to settle for dried flowers. At this time of year when flowers abound, nothing could be easier and more fun to collect.

Although Downton Abbey has a staff of gardeners ready to provide unlimited amounts of cut flowers for the mansion, I have to scramble a little. One of my problems is that I prefer to leave flowers where they belong, in the garden, dreading bare spaces that will change the look of my pride and joy. That's one reason I try to think outside the box. Using seed pods, downright weeds, or twigs, I can get away with cutting less of my precious garden.

One solution for me would be to start a cutting garden. It's a great idea for all non-Downton Abbey householders. Start with a 3 by 6 foot raised bed in a sunny location, adding plenty of soil to the bed. A fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 or 15-15-15 is a good idea. Later, if you continue to fertilize, use one with less nitrogen, such as 5-10-10. Annuals make excellent plants for a cutting garden; they can easily be grown from seed, will continue to re-bloom for the season after cutting, and are supposed to be cut, thus allaying my usual reluctance to cut. A list could begin with cosmos, zinnias, sweet peas, salvias, snapdragons, and asters. Perennials, such as hardy ageratums, feverfew, and phlox could be added, but all the choices are up to you.

Every year I plan to start a cutting garden and never do get around to it, so here's the way I operate. I collect flowers early in the morning or late at night when they're crisp with water. When I cut, I will, I hope, enhance rather than disfigure each plant. I try to make my depredations as inconspicuous as possible, meandering through the garden rather than cutting all the flowers from one specific area. I do carry a pail of tepid water to receive cut stems. I try to let the pail sit in the shade for an hour so the flowers can acclimate to their new status.

To prolong the life of cut flowers, you may hoard the small packets given to you at the florist or grocery store. You can also create your own flower preservative. There many different recipes. A simple one is to add Seven-Up and a few drops of chlorine bleach to the



water. Another is to combine 3 cups of water, 1 tablespoon of sugar, 1 teaspoon of vinegar, and 1 crushed aspirin. Another is to mix 2 tablespoons each of white vinegar and granulated sugar, mix with 1 cup hot water to dissolve the sugar and then add 3 cups of ice cold water.

Before assembling the flowers in a vase, re-cut the stems at an angle. Strip all leaves that will be underwater. Different kinds of flowers should be cut in different ways. Woody and hard-stemmed flowers such as flowering tree branches, chrysanthemums, phlox, and roses should be slit or crushed at the bottom. "Bleeder" flowers such as poppies, dahlias, euphorbia, hibiscus, and hydrangea should be split one inch at the cut end and held over a lit candle for 30 seconds, I dip stems in boiling water, which seems to work as well. To keep your arrangements fresh, top off the water periodically. If flowers droop, re-cut them and change the water in the vase.

As for your arrangement, the main thing is to have plenty of self-confidence. The best arrangements reflect the creator's taste. Fortunately, it is unlikely that Martha Stewart will happen to drop by to judge my work, so I don't even strive for (boring) perfection. I prefer a studied dishabille, just like my garden bed. Depending upon my mood, I might choose all of one species, mix different flowers, and either contrast or blend colors.

I have lots of vases, so I think carefully about which one to use. By now, I know which arrangements will go where in my home. I do try to keep an open mind and sometime opt for a series of small vases sitting on a mirror or a decorative plate or an unusually shaped vase to be set in a completely different space.

