

## Everlasting Delight

By Susan Camp

The Middle Peninsula is beautiful any time of year, but I think fall in our region is my favorite season. The leaves haven't begun to change yet, but the colorful wildflowers are blooming along the roadsides. Once you leave Route 17 and wander down the country lanes, you will find goldenrod, coreopsis, golden aster, and blue ageratum thriving in the wake of automobile exhaust and discarded fast food wrappings and Styrofoam cups.

While driving through Gloucester County last week, I thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if this profusion of color and scent could last throughout the year?" I remembered that my mother, who was no gardener, enjoyed growing everlastings, flowering plants that dry and preserve well. In French, they are known as "immortelles."

I decided to find out if everlastings are old-fashioned as a gardening idea. To my surprise, I discovered numerous sites online where you can buy everlasting seeds and plants, as well as sites that advertise everlasting wreaths, bouquets, and arrangements.

The flowers known as everlastings do not belong to one genus. Instead, they are flowers and seed pods that dry exceptionally well. Many are composed of stiff, papery bracts, which are modified leaves. When picked at the right time, everlastings can be dried or preserved in some way that will allow them to be enjoyed for several years. Actually, many flowers can be dried, but not always easily or well. Roses tend to lose their color and their petals when dried. I dried daffodils one year by allowing the cut flowers to absorb all of the water in their containers. The result was perfectly preserved flowers that looked as though they had been fashioned from silk and organdy, but my husband said our house smelled like a funeral home.

Iowa State University Horticulture and Home Pest news publication "Harvesting and Drying Everlasting Flowers" provides basic information and a list of popular everlasting annuals and perennials. "An Everlasting Garden" by Jim and Dotti Becker (1994) stresses the importance of identifying plants by their botanical or Latin names. Regional differences in common names can lead to confusion in identifying the plants you want for your everlasting garden. *Lunaria annua*, a fragrant biennial with shimmery, translucent seed pod partitions, is called money plant in some areas and honesty in other regions. My mother called it Pennies from Heaven, but she may have made that up.

Popular annuals used as everlastings include cockscomb (*Celosia cristata*), statice or sea lavender (*Limonium latifolium*), strawflower (*Helichrysum bracteatum*) and globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*). Some perennials that dry well include lavender (*Lavandula augustifolia* 'Hidcote' or 'Munstead'), wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), yarrow (*Achillea filipendulina*), and baby's breath (*Gypsophila paniculata*). Some everlastings retain fragrance.

Flowers should be harvested in the morning after the dew has dried. Choose unblemished blossoms that are partially open; they will continue to open as they dry. Leave as long a stem as possible, except with strawflowers, which have flimsy stems that you will need to replace with florist's wire. You may want to remove the leaves before drying.

Several drying methods exist, but bundling the flowers and hanging them in a warm, dry place out of direct sunlight is inexpensive and easy. Flowers with stiff stems can be dried upright in a container. Flowers can be dried in the microwave, in sand or borax, or preserved in glycerin solution, which can cause discoloration. YouTube videos on drying and preserving flowers are available on the internet. If stored carefully, everlastings will retain their form and color for several years.

This winter might be the time to design an everlasting bed. Annuals can be grown from seed. You may already have perennials that will dry well. If you enjoy arranging flowers or making wreaths, everlastings will provide a ready source of materials for projects you can display in your home or give as delightful gifts.

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