Preserving Woody Plant Material for Winter Arrangements

by Cora L. Warren

Many excellent books, pamphlets and articles have been written on the subject of preserving flora for winter arrangements, but it is far from an exact science. Only a few of the many hardy woody plants that respond to treatment are mentioned, although there are wide possibilities of achieving interesting and unique effects with such materials.

Branches treated in glycerine, in particular, can add a whole new dimension to the usual dried winter bouquets of grasses, statice and star flowers, or silica-gel dried flower heads, producing beautiful arrangements appropriate to a large variety of settings.

Almost all foliage can be dried by pressing the branches between sheets of newspaper and placing them under a light weight. This method will retain the leaf shape, but the color will be somewhat muted and the leaf will be unnaturally flat and difficult to use in a container.

There are some plants that may be air dried and will retain their interest. Hung by their stems in a warm, moisture-free environment until completely dry, they serve as a pretty contrast to the more dramatic glycerine treated material.

Many fruits dry naturally on the plants and need only be collected at the appropriate time. Some of this material becomes very fragile when dry and shatters with too much handling. This difficulty can be prevented to some extent by dipping the fruits after they are dry in a mixture of equal parts of clear lacquer and alcohol, or in an acrylic polymer medium thinned with water.

Most soft fleshy fruits such as berries do not dry well, but the few that do should be defoliated and placed upright in containers, or hung by their stems in a cool, dry place until thoroughly dehydrated. Their staying power can be improved by the use of lacquer and alcohol or acrylic polymer as described above.

Glycerine and water treatment will preserve foliage almost indefinitely, and leaves treated by this method can be used effectively for years. The color of the leaves changes, sometimes dramatically, but the form and texture retain their original aspect.

Cut or crush plant stems and place them in a glass jar containing a mixture of one part glycerine to two parts water. One part anti-
freeze to three parts water can be substituted if glycerine is difficult to obtain. The level of the liquid will drop quickly if large branches are absorbing it successfully, so it is well to check the liquid level daily, and top up with more of the mixture as needed. A tablespoon of charcoal added to the container will stop the formation of a grey film that sometimes appears on the surface. The liquid can be stored and used for another year if it is strained through fine cheesecloth and more charcoal added.

Not all woody plants will take up the glycerine successfully by the method described. Some authorities advise preserving certain materials by total immersion in a bath of glycerine solution; vines and other small plants that otherwise are a failure often respond to this treatment. Broad-leaved evergreens are particularly satisfactory at all seasons, except possibly in the dead of winter, and have the advantage of being available after deciduous trees and shrubs have become dormant.

Branches cut as the season advances toward autumn generally react better to treatment than if gathered earlier, but the conditioning takes somewhat longer as the sap is not flowing as freely.

The number of days taken to complete the absorption of glycerine sufficient for satisfactory preservation will vary greatly. Leaf color will continue to darken after removal from the liquid so a little experimentation may be needed to ascertain when to stop the process. Some books advise waiting until the leaves begin to ooze, but this produces an unattractive and dust-catching surface. A good test is to bend the leaves gently after they have been immersed in the solution for a few days; when they have reached the consistency of soft leather, they are ready for use.

It is well to cut considerably more material than will actually be needed, as the end product will vary from plant to plant, or even from specimen to specimen of the same plant.

Preserved branches may be stored flat in large boxes or hung until needed in a dry, airy place. If the leaves become crushed or limp on removal from storage, they sometimes can be restored by a light pressing with a warm iron, or by placing them between sheets of newspaper under a rug for a few days.

When one is planning a garden or adding to a collection, a new source of pleasure can be achieved by the discriminating choice of plants that lend themselves to preservation; for then, with little effort, the delights of the garden can be enjoyed indoors in a unique and intimate way during the long winter months.

Fagus grandifolia, Oxydendrum arboreum, Symphoricarpos albus. The white berries of the Symphoricarpos are added as a temporary accent though they do not dry well. Photo: P. Chvany.
Bibliography


Cora Warren, a volunteer and Friend of the Arnold Arboretum, is responsible for the beautiful seasonal arrangements that regularly appear in the entrance to the Administration Building.

Cryptomeria japonica lobbii, Mahonia sp., Carpinus orientalis. Photo: P. Chvany.