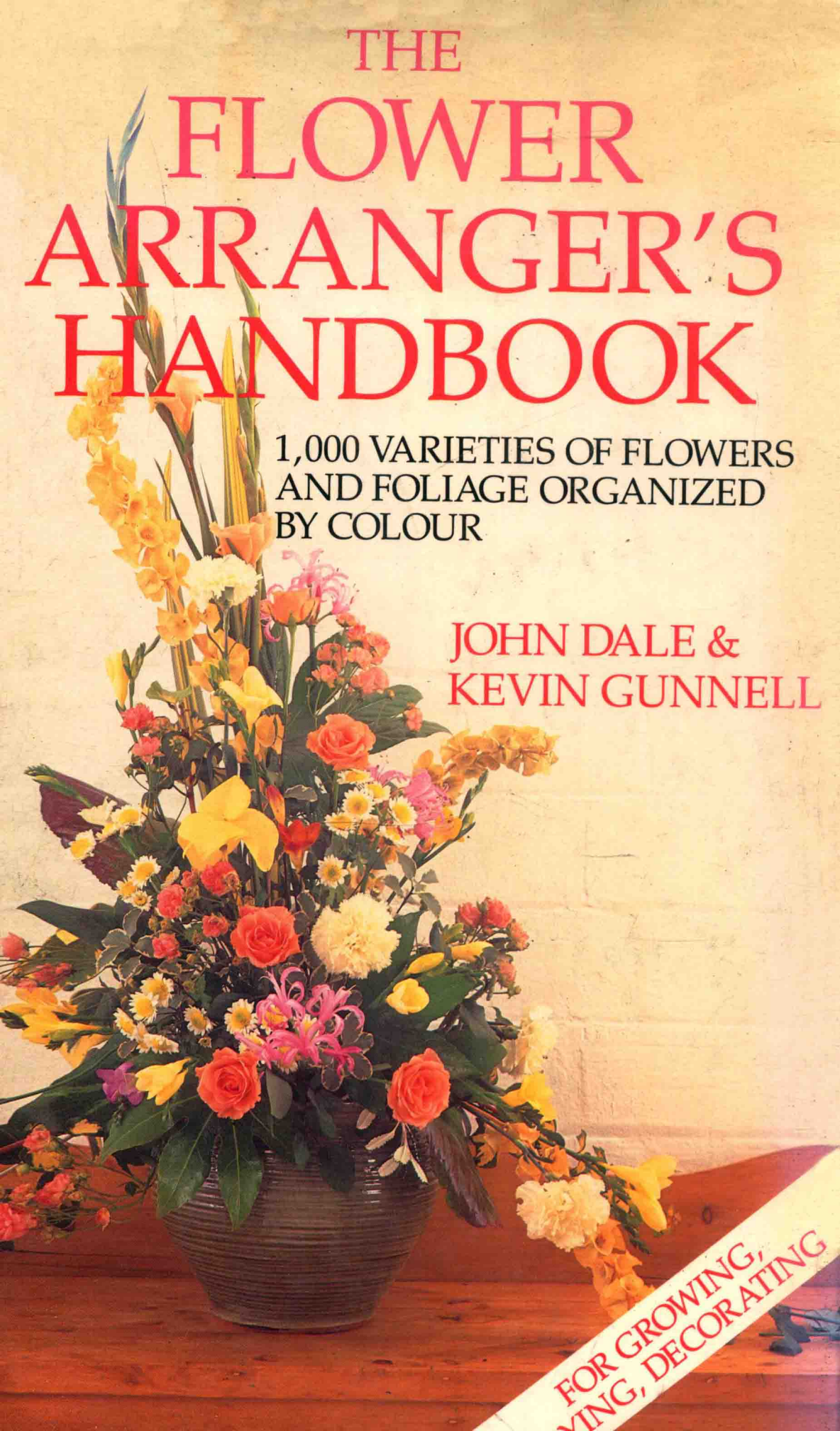
THE FLOWER ARRANGER'S HANDBOOK

1,000 VARIETIES OF FLOWERS AND FOLIAGE ORGANIZED BY COLOUR

JOHN DALE & KEVIN GUNNELL



FOR GROWING,
ING, DECORATING

THE FLOWER ARRANGER'S HANDBOOK

JOHN DALE & KEVIN GUNNELL

Macdonald

A Macdonald BOOK

Conceived and produced by
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THE FLOWER ARRANGER'S HANDBOOK

This book is dedicated to the memory of Kenneth James Pedder, a skilful plantsman and man of high principle, formerly Parks Superintendent of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London

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Introduction

A flower arranger has a desire to be creative, to gather colour and form, painting a picture with living materials. This may not be as lasting as a true picture, but its fleeting beauty is the more precious because of its transient nature.

There is something richly satisfying about choosing, growing and arranging flowers. Growing your own plant material allows you to plan ahead, to grow certain flowers for a special occasion, to have sufficient foliage for the occasional grand display, to decorate your home with an inexpensive and continuous supply of plant material all year round.

Growing and arranging should have no boundaries. Thanks to the skill of the dedicated plant breeder, some plants that were considered too rare or too tender to grow in certain parts of the world are now commonplace. We can see flowers that were once restricted to the botanical hot-house growing in the most unexpected places. A progressive interest in flower arranging and plant display has helped to awaken and develop our ideas about gardening, challenging the basic pattern of a broad lawn with privet hedge surround, making us more aware of the beauty of individual plants. Television, with its increasing range of broadcasts for the gardening enthusiast, has been responsible for showing us unusual plants and encouraging us to grow them. Winter evenings spent poring over plant and seed catalogues are also part of the flower arranger's life, selecting flowers for their colour, form, growing habit, or simply because they appeal. When your garden is later ablaze with colour, the time spent as an armchair gardener is justly rewarded.

Unfortunately not all the plants that you are able to grow in particular conditions will be suitable for cutting. Some flowers, and many more foliages, just refuse to take up water and wilt rapidly in an indoor environment. Certain flowers have a dislike for water-retaining foam. Not only the plant material, but also the container you wish to use can present certain problems in arranging – a favourite vase may have a slim neck or insufficient water space, for example.

Success in flower arranging consists of getting to know the mechanics of the craft, that is, the methods of creating your display, and the best ways to condition and maintain particular materials to keep them fresh and long-lasting. These techniques are clearly described in the opening chapters of the book, as are the various means of drying and preserving plant material. Preservation does occur by natural means, but modern aids such as drying agents can actually improve on nature in this case, rapidly removing the moisture from a flower while leaving its colour and shape intact. This fascinating subject is fully described in the appropriate chapter.

Colour has the strongest influence on gardening and flower arranging. The colour of a flower is usually what attracts us first, tempting us to find complementary materials and to create the perfect shape of arrangement to show off the flower at its best. Advice on design and simple colour theory in arranging explains the principles of a number of traditional and modern styles of flower arranging, both taking full advantage of the more sophisticated mechanics now available.

The delight in colour is also the theme for organization of the Encyclopedia of Plants. Hundreds of different species and cultivars listed under their generic names are divided into colour sections according to the dominant colours, so that you can readily find the availability of pink, blue and even green flowers, according to your preference. The colour sections – yellow, orange, red, pink, purple, blue, green and white – are cross-referenced to provide the widest possible choice. There are separate sections on plants which yield a glorious range of mixed flower colours, and on shrubs and small trees which offer spectacular foliage and additional blooms in due season.

To enable you to get the best out of growing and arranging plant material according to your own preferences, every plant is fully described with notes on cultivation and propagation, as well as its uses in flower arranging and individual tips on conditioning and preserving. The Encylopedia of Plants is followed by a valuable guide to propagation. The techniques are simply described and fully illustrated, so that even the most inexperienced gardener can rapidly increase a basic stock of plants. Not only can you enjoy a greater range of plant material for use in your own decorative schemes, you can

pass on coveted items to your friends and exchange new plants for other treasures.

Sharing your increased knowledge and expertise can be part of the pleasure of cultivating and displaying flowers. Joining a local flower arranging society or garden club is a useful and enjoyable step, especially if you are new to flower arranging. A club will provide the opportunity to see the work of visiting demonstrators, undertake practical classes and participate in large-scale decorative displays and flower arranging competitions. This offers a new and challenging approach to designing with plant materials and in addition, the stalls and sales tables organized by a club or society offer an Aladdin's cave of practical equipment and decorative items which can spark off new ideas.

Take care to choose the best seed, grow it correctly, harvest the flower when it is ready and arrange it sensitively – the result is surely worth the effort. Remember that a cut flower is a precious life. It may have taken a long time to grow and its beauty is too breathtaking to be wasted. There are no short cuts to growing and arranging. This book has been written to smooth the path towards an expert flower display, and above all to increase your enjoyment of the art of flower arranging.

Equipment, Mechanics and Containers

The equipment for flower arranging can be extensive, like any artist's 'tool box': a key for every lock, a brush for every stroke. It is in the nature of a flower arranger to collect and hoard things that will be useful. However, when you start flower arranging, it isn't necessary to acquire all the equipment at once. A wise arranger will learn what equipment and mechanics are about. Some of the items may be expensive and not very useful. Equipment and mechanics have long been favourite words of the flower arranger. In this context, they mean the apparatus needed to cut, arrange and maintain plant material. They are not precise words; equipment generally covers such items as scissors, tape or wire, and mechanics refer to the method of stem support. Containers come in the widest possible variety, from vases and baskets to bottles and cans. Using the appropriate mechanics, all kinds of objects can become suitable and versatile containers. Driftwood, too, is a valuable flower arranging accessory, and this chapter explains how to adapt and convert such items.

CUTTERS Flower-arranging scissors come in a variety of shapes and sizes. They must have a good cutting edge and one blade will probably be serrated; this will be useful for stripping the outer covering from certain stems. Handle the scissors before you buy them, making sure they are well balanced and that they fit your hand. Check the pivot screw – often the cutting arms are simply screwed together and will work loose with constant movement. Choose a pair that has the end of the screw knocked back in the manner of a rivet. They will slacken slightly with use but not fall apart.

Secateurs have become a popular alternative. Longer handles give greater leverage to cut through thick stems more efficiently. The spring-loaded action, common to nearly all brands, allows the blades to re-open automatically. Further refinements, like pivoting handles, reduce the physical effort needed in a cutting action.

A small sharp knife is useful for scraping the bark from woody stems prior to conditioning. Choose one that will close up – open blades become dull and can be dangerous. I favour the multi-blade type: the screwdriver blade is sometimes useful; the corkscrew indispensable.

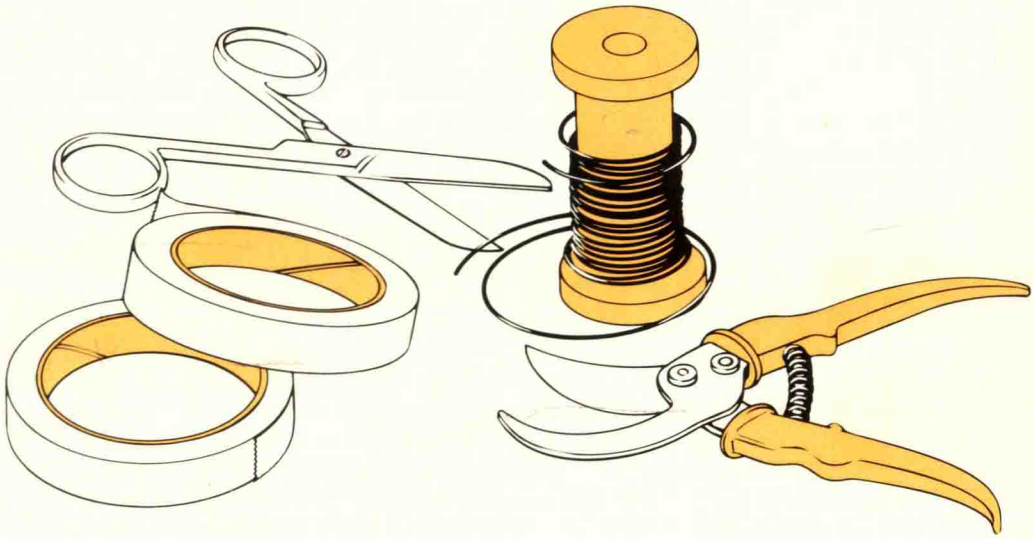
TAPE AND FIXATIVES There are two basic types of tape available. One is an adhesive tape, the other is made from latex and has a self-sealing quality. The chief use of adhesive tape is for securing water-retaining foam. It is sufficiently narrow to be concealed by plant material. False stems, to extend the length of dried plant material, can be permanently fixed using adhesive tape.

Gutta Percha was originally made from latex. Modern technology now provides the same qualities in plastic and waxed crêpe paper. Lacking any strong adhesive, Gutta Percha is a temporary tape. Under pressure, it will unwind and should never be used to secure the mechanics of an arrangement.

Oasis Fix is a semi-permanent fixative, often found in over-copious quantities anchoring a pinholder to a shallow dish. Deposits of fixative remain on the separated surfaces and can be removed using a cloth soaked in nail polish remover or a similar spirit thinner.

Plasticine or similar modelling material, once the property of the toy box, is now used extensively in flower arranging. It lacks the holding strength of Oasis Fix but it will remove cleanly. A small pellet discreetly placed under an apple, for instance, will prevent it from rolling on to a surface that it favours.

WIRE Wire, in reel form or straight lengths, should be free from rust and almost black in colour. The colour indicates that it has been treated to make it malleable. Some wires have a plastic coating, protecting them from oxidation – a quality to be appreciated – but you



may find them slippery and difficult to use. The gauge, or thickness, affects the use of the wire. Thinner gauges are easier to bend and are less damaging if they are used as a tie for delicate stems. Reel wire has the advantage of length. It is ideal for encircling the lip of a container to secure wire netting. Reel wire in the hands of a dextrous florist is almost an art form, combining the individual pieces for a bouquet with a speed that is blurring to the unskilled. Single wires vary in length from about 6in (15cm) to approximately 18in (45cm). Their uses are numerous. Thick-gauge wire acts as a perfect splint, secured with tape, for damaged stems of dried plant material. The lighter gauges will bind flower stems together, secure mechanics or, inserted into a soft wayward stem, straighten it. For drying, flower heads that need an artificial stem can be given one by inserting a medium gauge wire through the head or into the back of the calyx. This should be done when the flower is fresh; the wire will be easier to push through and any residual moisture will slightly rust the wire in contact, producing a stronger bond.

Chicken wire was used extensively as a form of stem support before the introduction of water-retaining foam. Flowers were pushed through the crumpled mesh into the water in the dish. This severely restricted the direction of the plant material; foliage and flowers with a natural bend were jealously guarded, to be used as 'downward' flowing material. Chicken wire is still very useful as mechanics for arrangements of very heavy materials, branches of spring blossom or thick trails of ivy. The mesh size must be 2in (5cm), for anything smaller will prevent the flower stem from passing through. Crumple sufficient chicken wire into a loose ball and place it in the container, extending it to the bottom of the dish. Pull the wire ball slightly to raise it above the lip. To secure the mesh, thread reel or stub wire through the mesh and tie it around the lip of the container. You may find a cap of chicken wire over moist foam reassuring, particularly when some of the stems need a little extra support.

PINHOLDERS A pinholder is the simplest method of supporting a flower stem. Usually made from lead, it is flat and circular in shape, with a concentric pattern of inset steel pins. Like all good ideas, it has been improved upon, both in size and shape. Oblong, half-moon, semi-circular and square are some of the alternative shapes. Well pinholders are containers in themselves. Circular with sloping sides, the pins are set in the centre of the base. Most flower clubs carry this indispensable item, in a range of sizes and weights.

As your pinholder collection increases, like me you will find other uses for them. They make marvellous counter-balance weights at the back of an arrangement that is slightly unstable, when time doesn't permit its rearranging. The weight of the pinholder must be considered. The heavier it is, the more stable it will be.

The principle of a pinholder is simple: flower stems are impaled on, or wedged between, the pins. Choose the pinholder carefully, as not all the pins are spaced to a standard. Pins that are close together readily support fine stems but will bend and close up should you attempt to force on a hard woody stem.

Flat pinholders are used in shallow dishes where a minimum amount of water is required. To prevent them sliding around the dish, fix four pellets of Plasticine to the base of the pinholder, and with a slight twisting movement, attach it to the bottom of the dish. This must be done when both surfaces are perfectly dry.

If the pinholder is to be used with water-retaining foam, avoid closely set pins, as the pins get blocked with particles of foam. The only successful method of cleaning that I have discovered, is to allow the particles to dry and remove them with a wire brush. Holders specially designed for use with foam are better.

Because the holders are made from lead, they are expensive to replace. After-care will make them last indefinitely. Always clean the pins after using the holder, removing any foam and stem debris and straightening pins that have become bent. The back of a table knife slipped between the pins will do this.

Keep the pinholders dry when they are not being used. The pins are made from steel and will rust very quickly if moisture is allowed to collect between them. Store them on a piece of cloth, pins downward. This will prevent the sharpness becoming dulled should anything be accidentally placed on top of them.

WATER-RETAINING FOAM Water-retaining foam is a substance made from minute compressed plastic granules. It has the quality to absorb and retain large quantities of water without losing its rigidity. The foam is yielding and can be cut to any shape with a sharp knife.

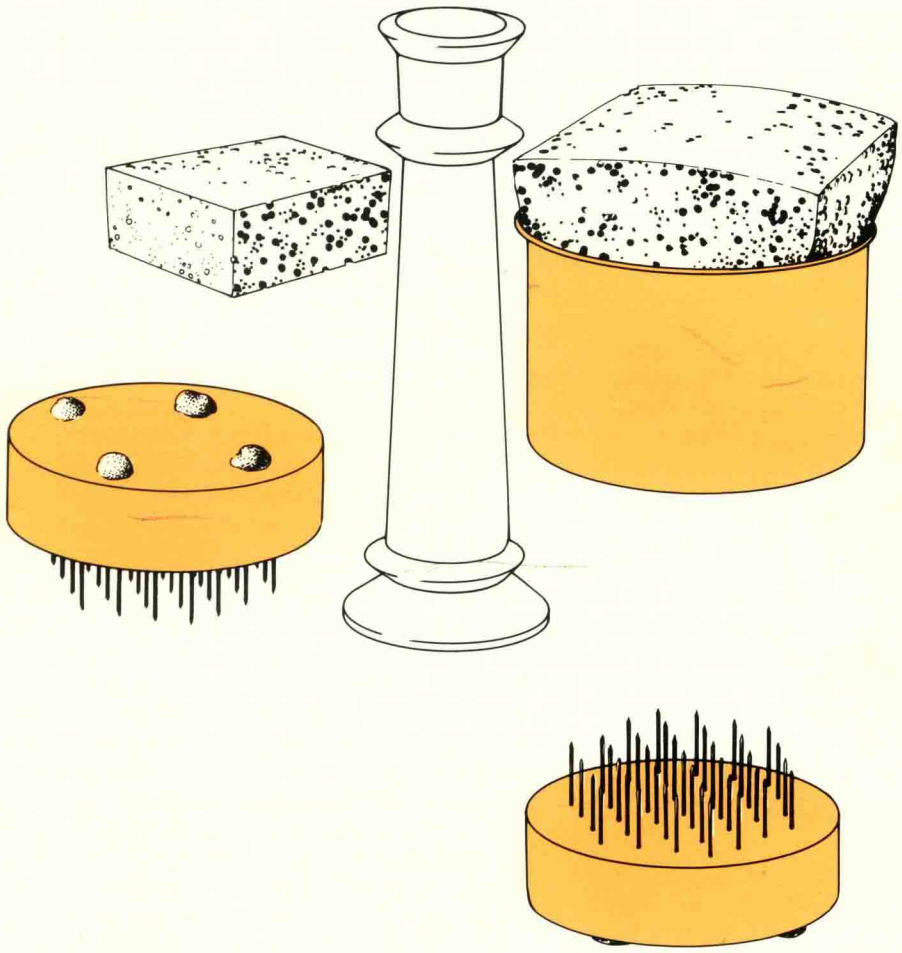
Water-retaining foam is something of a verbal handful. Much as I dislike umbrella words, I am grateful that we refer to all makes and brands as 'oasis'. It is a word that has been generally adopted by the flower arranger, although it is in fact a brand name. It is available in oblong blocks and small tubular 'rounds'.

To soak the foam, submerge it in water. When the foam sinks just below the water level and no air bubbles are being released, it is then fully charged.

Once wet foam has dried out, it will not readily reabsorb moisture. Resoaking in water with a few drops of washing-up liquid added is recommended as a rejuvenator. Any excess moist oasis should be stored in a polythene bag, to prevent it from drying out.

Oasis has replaced many of the traditional methods of flower support, as it allows greater flexibility for positioning plant material. Stems can be inserted at any angle and will remain in position. Generally it is used in conjunction with containers that have no capacity for holding water. Wrapped in thin polythene, oasis will act as mechanics for swags and plaques. It must be thoroughly saturated before it is wrapped.
Water-retaining foam, being a substitute for a free well of water within the container, usually fits the neck or interior of the container quite tightly. It must be supplied with moisture each day, so to facilitate pouring in fresh water, cut a small wedge-shaped passage down the back of the foam block.

Try to get as much use as possible from the foam. When one side has too many holes it can be reversed and used again. When the foam is of no further use for flower arranging, don't throw it away. Instead, allow it to dry and crumble it over the garden. It works into and lightens the soil and helps to retain moisture, which can be useful for areas that drain quickly.



DRY FOAM Dry foam is used in the same way as water-retaining foam, though, as its name suggests, it is a support for dried plant material. It will not absorb water and should never be used as a substitute for water-retaining foam.

CANDLE CUPS As the name suggests, these were originally made to adapt candlesticks as containers. They are bowl shaped, made from plastic or metal, with a base projection that fits into the candlestick. If the fit is not exact, a collar of Plasticine or fixative will act as packing. Enterprising manufacturers have now given us a very useful refinement, candle cups with screw-threaded bases. They are obtainable with internal and external threads. The thread is usually very short, not suitable for using with candlesticks, as their chief purpose is to convert table lamp bases into containers. There are a large number of variations on the market to suit every mechanical contingency.

BASES AND DRAPES In the home a base should always be used to prevent furniture being marked by the rough under-surface of some containers. A cake board covered with soft cloth is the cheapest and easiest to make. Bases of different textural finish add to the atmosphere of an arrangement. Wood, slate and stone relate well with naturalistic designs, velvet harmonizes with flowers of a soft delicate colour and texture. Hessian has become very popular as a base covering with plant material that is rough in texture. It can be purchased in a range of colours, which gives a stronger colour link between base and plant material. Where flower colour needs emphasizing, a base of contrasting or toning colour will achieve this.

A base will often make an arrangement portable, particularly when a secondary grouping of plant material has been included.

The visual balance of an arrangement may be affected by the base. To please the eye, the height of an arrangement must be balanced by the proportional width of its base. A base that is too large will accentuate the width of the arrangement and one that is too small will over-emphasize the height. Either will destroy the proportions. A base the same width as the widest dimension of the arrangement usually provides a happy medium.

A selection of bases need not mean a large collection, since one lightweight wood board with interchangeable 'mob caps' of material will give you flexibility of colour and finish without taking up a lot of storage space. There will be occasions when a base is used to support components in a more permanent way. Lichened branches to represent a tree in a landscape design aren prime example. A base made from wood is the obvious choice. Hold the branch on the wood base to establish the correct angle before you fix it permanently into position. Screw a small angle bracket onto either side of the base of the branch. You will be able to select a pair of suitable size from your local DIY shop. To establish the position of the holes in the wood base, hold the branch against the base and mark with a pencil through the holes in the bracket. The branch may be screwed on to the base but this will make the fixing permanent. Drilling holes through the base to accommodate a bolt and wing nut, will make the positioning stable, at the same time allowing you to dismantle the base and branch should you want to use them separately.

As the kitchen has always been a treasure chest for providing containers, the same applies to bases. One of the most useful bases that I own is the breadboard. The advantage of a culinary base is that it won't require extra storage space; once used, it can be returned to its original, albeit mundane, purpose. Quite a number of bases used for aesthetic reasons will have a rough under-surface, so again, to protect furniture surfaces, glue pads of felt on to the bases.

Drapes made from cloth are usually confined to the flower arrangement show bench. They were a forerunner to the now over-used back boards and are at present considered out of fashion. They helped to present the flowers in much the same way as wallpaper in the home. I cannot, therefore, see any need for them in the home. However, should you decide to use one, avoid bringing it into contact with the mechanics of the arrangement. Most cloth is absorbent and will act as a syphon.

FLOWER BUCKETS I am not being flippant, by including a section on such a humble object. Flower buckets are a neglected subject in most flower arranging and gardening books, yet we use them constantly. Arrangers should keep them specifically for holding plant material, as multiple use inside the home increases the risk of water pollution. Buckets made from plastic, with handles at the side, are light and easy to carry. The depth of the bucket must be sufficient to support the length of the flower stem. Various sizes will be needed for different lengths of stem. It is important to keep the foliage and flower head dry, while at the same time ensuring that the stem end is in contact with the water. Rinse the flower buckets each time they are used and scrub them periodically with a mild detergent, to remove any algae that have built up. If space allows, a plastic dustbin is very useful for holding large quantities of long-stemmed plant material.

Store plastic buckets in a shed or garage. Plastic is affected by extreme temperatures and will crack when exposed to excessive heat or cold. The bath, something of a joke among flower arrangers, is often used as a large bucket. Ideally it should be used to float plant material that requires conditioning through both stem and leaf.

The association of water and vessel allows me to mention briefly the flower arranger's watering can. Choose one that has a small-bored spout, so that the water is introduced at a steady pace. The same reason for including the watering can also applies to a water mister. The water mister is generally sold as a hand-held spray for liquid pesticides. Because of this, keep it clearly labelled to avoid any misuse. The spraying action is mechanical, operated by hand. Choose one of good quality – bargain-price kinds, in my experience, fail to work efficiently.

CONES Cones are generally used to achieve a secondary area of mechanics. Their name accurately describes their shape – conical, with an internal reservoir for water or oasis. Unfortunately, the amount of plant material that they will hold is limited, by virtue of their shape. The sloping sides of the cone will cause unsupported flowers to lean. This can be corrected by wedging short stems of waste material between the cone side and the flowers. Flowers that have an aversion to oasis should be arranged in a cone filled with water. This can then be included in the design, using the surrounding material to disguise the cone. When the cone is used to extend the height of an arrangement, this can be accomplished by taping the cone to a garden cane. Always position the mounted cane before you start to arrange the flowers, as any attempt to do it after the arrangement has been completed will cause undue disturbance. Orchid tubes are handy for single stems that dislike oasis. The plastic cap should be left in place to reduce evaporation. The end of the tube is usually rounded; a cocktail stick taped to it makes it easier to push into the oasis.

CONTAINERS There was a time, before flowers were 'arranged', when the glass vase was king. Sadly it is now scorned by today's arranger for being old-fashioned and restricting. This may be so. In a world of oasis, wire and pinholders, who wants a container that will not allow downward movement and exposes to the admirer an expanse of crossing stems? That said, do not be too eager to dispose of this forgotten king; some flowers and settings demand its continued use. Not all flowers need arranging – indeed, some benefit from not being arranged. Poppies and forget-me-nots, picked from a morning garden, maintain their natural beauty when they are simply placed in a vase. Spring blossom does not have to be forced into a jungle of wire netting and oasis. One or two sprays will look just as elegant in a cut-glass vase as they would in a more contrived design. If you find the exposed stems offensive, colour the water with a non-toxic vegetable dye to disguise them.

Having rescued the vase from oblivion, there are occasions when plant material has to be arranged and a vase will not be suitable. These occasions have given birth to one of the new umbrella words . . . containers, which sweepingly describes anything that will physically hold water and plant material.

There are a considerable number of custom-built containers sold in florists shops and at flower or garden clubs. They generally follow a pattern, being of pedestal type, featuring two suitably clad cherubs, with odd looking faces, clambering up a corinthian column. Low containers tend to be less ornate but still have the attached cup on the top, for oasis.

Adapted containers are legion, and their charm often lies in their individuality. Heavy containers are best, as they are less likely to over-balance. They provide that feeling of security, essential when you are arranging flowers for the first time. An adapted container should be sympathetic to the plant material. Unglazed pottery blends with preserved foliages and flowers that are in the lighter colour range, yellow, orange and green. A surface with a high glaze can be very distracting; its reflective quality quarrels with plant material and is best avoided. Hand-thrown pots with a geometric direction lend themselves to flowers that are sculptured, almost moulded, in form. Baskets have an unsophisticated air about them, so flowers and foliage should be allowed to flow naturally in this medium. The earthy colour of basketwork is not intrusive, and will accept virtually any flower colour. Kitchenware, with a vegetation motif, can be very amusing in association with a design of fruit or garden vegetables. Silver or glass cakestands, with a well pinholder secured to the top, will raise the height of an arrangement. The sophisticated finish of this type of stand usually calls for a formal, elegant style of arrangement. Dishes that will eventually be concealed by the plant material may be of any