



A way with flowers

Florist Shane Connolly has many high-profile, international clients and works By Appointment to HRH The Prince of Wales. He designed all the flowers for the Royal wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Here, he reveals a small sample of his vast experience, as detailed in his new book *A Year in Flowers*



My mother loved flowers and she made them a very normal part of everyday life. We always had flowers and plants of some sort in the house. Most often it was just a few stems picked from the garden, or a bunch of daffodils bought from the green-grocer but, as I grew up, the idea of bringing nature inside and observing the changing cycle of the seasons, was a routine firmly planted in my mind. I realise now how lucky I was.

At that stage, I never dreamt that flowers would be my career. But now it's very obvious that my whole approach has its roots in those early experiences: I still like to bring nature inside and choose seasonal, locally grown flowers whenever I can and whatever the scale of the event I've been asked to design. I still generally prefer it if the finished decorations have a simplicity and artlessness that emphasises the characteristics of the individual flowers or plants rather than any floral technical wizardry. And finally, I like it when flowers look 'comfortable' in their surroundings... when they seem the right choice for the container and for the room they are in.

I think all this is particularly important at home. In fact I like to think that home flowers are like good home cooking: get the best, freshest, seasonal



ABOVE "Nothing epitomises Spring more than blossom. I love each and every variety as it comes into its own, but perhaps nothing is quite so uplifting as watching the first piece of single blossom opening at home. Then you really feel that spring is on the way even if snow is falling outside".

BELOW Shane Connolly is passionate about using quality seasonal flowers and says "Nowadays we all agree that, when it comes to food, we should be sourcing the best quality ingredients from local producers. It's exactly the same with plants and flowers, and a little bit of common sense goes a long way to helping them last and give of their best in your house."





ABOVE "I love to use flowers thoughtfully and with meaning when designing wedding flowers and this pretty spring headpiece for a young bridesmaid carries lots of symbolism from the language of flowers. Lily of the valley signifies the return of happiness, forget-me-nots for true love, ivy trails for a happy marriage and auriculas to represent the arts. The colour combination was inspired by a delicate 1930s painting of angels, found in a child's hymnbook. However, the wiring for these miniature masterpieces is certainly not something you should try doing yourself. Call in the experts!"

BELOW The 'meadow' planted beneath these trees is a grouping of small cowslip, forget-me-not and wild strawberry plants with clumps of grasses and weeds dug up from the wilder edges of the garden



ingredients and do the least amount with them to give the best results. Let the ingredients speak for themselves. It's a shame when people say they get tense and nervous about arranging flowers at home. It should be a pleasure. There are good practices which help flowers last longer but generally speaking, I think flowers should be allowed to arrange themselves. Not making them do anything that looks artificial or unnatural sometimes requires a lot of restraint and self control!

Watching nature and being aware of the seasons also makes flower choice so much simpler. After many years in the business, I am still amazed

how a few stems of flowers can bring life to even the most unprepossessing space. And often it is just a few stems that are needed.


CHOOSING, CUTTING AND ARRANGING

When cutting from the garden, use sharp scissors or secateurs to make a clean cut. A torn stem won't absorb water as easily. In the interests of both appearance and preservation of the plant, cutting at the bottom of a stem or back to a leaf joint is good practice. The plant recovers more quickly and you won't have left an ugly stump. Try to cut in a cooler part of the day, or when the sun is not shining directly on the flowers. If possible place immediately into a bucket of water. If not, put the stems in a shady place as you gather more. Never cut multi-petalled flowers like roses when they are fully opened or when they're wet from rain. They simply won't last.

Someone once said that cut flowers and houseplants should be treated like guests: when they arrive, offer them a strong drink and a bath and let them have a good rest before expecting them to do anything. So when you bring them in from the garden or out of the car try the following:

Remove any leaves that might sit below water otherwise they'll rot and make the water smell horrible. Then cut the stem at an angle with sharp scissors and place in a bucket of deep, cold water. Flowers with very woody stems, such as lilacs, may benefit from having the bottom few centimetres crushed to expose more fibres to the water. Bashing them carefully with a hammer on a hard surface will do the trick.

Flowering shrubs, with a disproportionate amount of leaf to flower, will last longer if they have a high percentage of their leaves removed. Again lilacs, or mock orange blossom, are good examples. Once flowers are acclimatised overnight or for a few hours at least, pick a container that holds enough water for the amount of stems you are putting in it. Cut flowers and foliage drink more water in the first 24 hours so always remember to top up water levels. Always re-cut each stem immediately before placing it in the vase of water. Finally, never place any arrangements near direct sources of heat or light. ►



A small country church is decorated with an avenue of young crab-apple trees in old terracotta pots, underplanted with a meadow of forget-me-nots, cowslips, wild strawberries and wild grasses. Incorporating living plants into the decorations for special occasions like this adds a completely new dimension: you can replant the crab-apple trees afterwards as life-long reminders of the day, and dismantle the plants beneath and give them to guests as well. It also follows my own philosophy of using plants organically – where they are used again after the main event. For now the trees have been placed in these beautiful old terracotta pots. It's a very simple and inexpensive idea that delivers a magnificent overall effect.

Seasonal Flowers



ABOVE In this age of instant beauty, many garden plants are sold in full flower. I like to buy them like that and have them inside for a week or so before planting them permanently outside. For instance, I bought these pretty clematis plants and found a temporary home for them in this square log basket. We're all guilty of trying too hard sometimes, and avoid the simple and obvious in an effort to impress. This clematis is *clematis cartmanii pixie*. I love also to cut lily of the valley from growing plants which can then be planted out. The cuttings work for arrangements or a bouquet for an anniversary, for example, and the plants will flower, with a bit of luck, on every anniversary.

BELOW It is rare to achieve the effect of 'colourfulness' with flowers alone and multicoloured schemes are particularly tricky. Here, I've taken a handful of burgundy and orange tulips and placed them like botanical specimens into old chemist's jars filled with tinted water. This is a simple way to add several more shades to the palette.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shane Connolly's new book *A Year in Flowers: Inspiration for Everyday Living* is published by Clearview books and priced at £30. It features beautiful photography by Jason Lowe. Connolly has authored three previous titles, *Table Flowers*, *Wedding Flowers* and *The Language of Flowers* (Conran Octopus), which have sold worldwide and been translated into six different languages. He runs a hugely successful flower decorating business, regularly lectures and has just come back from a major tour in the USA and Japan.



YOU CAN NEVER HAVE TOO MANY CONTAINERS

I'd like to mention a few shapes that I do find especially useful

SMALL BOTTLES that hold single stems, in clear or coloured glass, work well with tiny delicate things.
TALLER DECANTERS will hold a larger stem or branch. They make flowers look like botanical specimens.
WIDER TOPPED VASES in glass or copper are perfect for bunches of bought flowers or garden collections alike. They hold lots of water, essential for larger bunches which need it.
NARROW NECKED jugs hold things together in a way the wider ones don't.

Garden flowers especially seem to have a natural affinity with jugs.
COLOURED GLASS can completely increase the intensity of flowers and foliage alike. Turquoise glass in particular, flatters any flower.
BOWLS LARGE AND SMALL are great for floating or heaping together broken off flower heads. Fruit too.
QUIRKY CONTAINERS like a Buddha foot or pewter inkwell are just a bit of fun. They do hold flowers wonderfully but also remind us not to take it all too seriously. ■



FEATURE EXTRACTED FROM A YEAR IN FLOWERS BY SHANE CONNOLLY
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