

GARDENING



‘We’ve slowed down and are noticing more’

DRIED FLOWERS

The crisis has brought floral artist Bex Partridge closer to nature, she tells **Madeleine Howell**

Bex Partridge of Botanical Tales is a floral artist, grower and gatherer, who works with dried flowers to create sustainable arrangements out of “dead stuff”: ethereal seasonal wreaths, hanging mobiles, bouquets, dome jars and pressed flower art. Her everlasting blooms capture a moment in time; and while in lockdown at home in Farnham with her husband and two sons, Henry, seven, and Arlo, four, she finds connecting with nature, tending to her allotment and crafting her displays more rewarding than ever.

“I feel so appreciative of how spring and the life cycle of flowers from seed to dried hasn’t come to a standstill, despite everything else that’s happening,” she says. “We spent my 40th birthday walking through swathes of bluebells, just



Gardening newsletter

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LOCAL BRANCH
Bex Partridge, main; picking from her allotment, left; with sons Arlo and Henry, below left

HOME-MADE CARDS

Bex says: “Cards are a ritual I swear by, even if it is easier to call or text.”

Gather

Small, pressed flower heads with stalks and leaves attached: I work with violas, larkspur and nigella flowers; Washi tape; Blank, recycled folded card

Let’s get started

1

Start by selecting your favourite and most perfect of blooms. Trim them if necessary to ensure they fit on the space of the card.

2

Lay flowers in position then tear thin strips of Washi tape – I tend to tear mine widthways as well as lengthways to give a more delicate look. Carefully lay two strips over the flower to secure it in place. I use a fine black pen and write the date and flower type in the corner of the folded card before writing my message.



LAURA EDWARDS

PERSONAL TOUCH
Creating a handmade card

feeling glad to be safe and well. Time feels stretched out: we’ve slowed down and started to notice more. I feel a deeper sense of gratitude for everything that nature provides us with.”

In her new book, *Everlastings: How to Grow, Harvest and Create with Dried Flowers* (see below), Partridge shares the secrets of transforming dried flowers into decorative home accessories, as well as wearable flower crowns, brooches, boutonnieres and hair clips.

“Like many people, I first encountered dried flowers in my grandmother’s house,” she says. “People often say they remind them of their grandma, but they’ve become a fashionable choice for weddings, shop displays, commemorations and celebrations once more. Some people do have hang-ups about what they were like in the past – obnoxious, brightly coloured strawflowers and statice flowers in dusty fireplaces. I prefer beautiful dusky pinks, deep burgundies and muted shades.

“I love observing flowers as they dry and transform. When I hang them out on wire, their appearance changes, and I can hear them crinkling and crackling. The beauty is really in the process itself: it’s one of my daily rituals to check in on how they’re doing, what’s changed and whether the petals have shrunk. It’s a sustainable way to make the best of British flowers we have, drying the bounty to extend their longevity and enjoying them through the winter, rather than importing flowers from around the globe.”

Partridge had a corporate career for 15 years before she became a full-time floral artist, and rediscovered dried blooms almost by chance.

“It was a stressful time in my life. I was six months pregnant with my second child, and a friend had given me a bunch of flowers,” she says.

“They inadvertently dried in the vase, and looked beautiful. I ended up making a wreath with them – they were so lovely I couldn’t bear to throw them away. I’ve always brought things into the house from outside, but that kick-started the dried flower obsession.

“We’d been in Amsterdam for two years with my job, and I think that sparked something in me, too. There’s such an outdoorsy culture there, of balcony gardens and cycling, even in the city. I felt more surrounded by nature than ever. When I had my second child, I didn’t want to go back to the office. It’s such a cliché, but when you have kids, you realise what’s important.

“One autumn – when I harvest ready to decorate people’s homes leading into Christmas – I decided to make the jump. I’ve always been a gardener: we have a small garden, and an allotment where we grow flowers to dry – scabious, zinnias, monk’s hood, globe thistle, marigolds, cornflowers, eryngium, Chinese lantern – as well as veg, and bee- and butterfly-friendly blooms for biodiversity.”

Partridge isn’t the only one finding joy in immutable blooms, as her 48,000 followers on her Instagram account (@botanicaltales) tuning into her live how-to videos would attest. At a time when we’ve all retreated to our homes, the self-soothing, nostalgic process of gathering, pressing and drying flowers,

whether for ourselves, as an activity to engage children, or as a means to create a thoughtful DIY gift for a loved one, has become even more appealing.

“Some flowers are still too fresh and juicy for drying at the moment, but I’ve been trying things that I haven’t often dried before: tulips, daffodils, ranunculus. My take is to try it and see what happens: there’s no reason why you can’t dry dahlias, if you want to,” she tells me. “I don’t know how we’ll feel about this bizarre time looking back, but I have a whole press of flowers that I’ve gathered this spring during lockdown. Hopefully we can reflect on

the positives, as well as the darker moments.”

The best time for foraging is from August onwards, when nature dries out and is there for the picking, she says – beech and oak tree branches, wetland grasses like *Phragmites australis*, honeysuckle and wild clematis vines. “Once you start opening your eyes to the possibilities of dried flowers, it’s really hard not to bring things home,” she says.

Her book offers tips on foraging and what and how to dry. The projects are split into four sections: wreaths, wearables, in the home (including table decorations) and “with love” – using dried flowers to mark occasions with pressed flower frames, cards and displays.

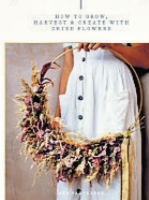
Partridge also points me to *Flowers from the Farm* – a directory of flower sellers across the UK. Buying directly supports local flower growers. Her favourites include Hedgerow & Bloom (hedgerowandbloom.uk) near her home in Farnham, and she also buys dried flowers and hops for garlands from Essentially Hops in Canterbury (essentiallyhops.co.uk).

Usually, Partridge spends spring and summer hosting workshops: currently, she’s focusing on virtual formats and bespoke commissions. Her online seasonal wreath tutorial is available to buy and stream via Illuminated Shadows, a platform which specialises in craft tutorials.

Beyond dried flowers, the urge to bring the outside in feels somehow more vital in these strange times we are living in. As Partridge says, joy can still be found in such simple things as flowers.

Visit botanicaltales.com

EVERLASTINGS



BUY THE BOOK
Everlastings: How to Grow, Harvest and Create with Dried Flowers by Bex Partridge (Hardie Grant, £14.99), is available from Thrus



BEX PARTRIDGE'S DRIED FLOWER TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

You don’t need equipment to dry flowers at home, and from spring into summer, there is plenty to dry.

◆ Hang a simple branch from a wall in your house and hang tulips and peonies out to dry using string or twine. Not only does it look beautiful now, but you will then have dried blooms to play with later.

◆ With dried flowers, you can start a project and come back to it, so you’re less time-bound than with fresh flowers, and you can add or take away from your arrangements when you like.

◆ Try to avoid hanging flowers in direct sunlight, which will bleach and scorch them. Choose a room that is free of moisture and not too hot. The easiest way to keep displays dust and cobweb-free is to blow them gently with a hairdryer (on the lowest, coldest setting).

◆ Press daintier pansies, violas, forget-me-nots

and other miniature beauties in a flower press or between the pages of a book.

◆ Sow some helichrysum seeds now, ready for autumn.

◆ Keep an eye out for poppy seed heads and grasses in summer to pick and dry.

◆ Honesty (*Lunaria annua*) is amazing for drying. Pick the green seed pods in the next month or so – then, once dried, peel off the outer shell to reveal the translucent silver disc within.

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LONG LIFE
The start of a dried flower work – fresh tulips are hung from a branch