

Horticulture Diagnostic Laboratory



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Potpourri and Fragrance Gardens

Potpourri is a mixture of fragrant herbs, flowers, spices, fixatives and essential oils. Before we had air fresheners in spray cans and colognes in atomizers, we had potpourri. These natural air fresheners are enjoying new-found popularity today.

There are two types of potpourri -- moist and dry. I will concentrate on the dry type. For information on both, refer to any good book on herbs. Two that are readily available are *The World of Herbs and Spices* by Ortho and *Herbs* by Jacqueline Heritean.

Whatever recipe you select, you will then need to grow or purchase the ingredients. Some of the more popular ingredients used are roses, lavender (leaves and flower buds -- the stems may be burned as incense), the leaves and flowers of the many scented leaf geraniums, rosemary, mint, lemon balm, thyme, sweet woodruff, lemon verbena, santolina and southernwood to name just a few.

Save the flower petals of marigolds, rudbeckia, black-eyed-Susan's, zinnias, cornflowers, sunflowers and regular geraniums. Experiment with whatever flowers you have available. I hope you have started adding herbs to your garden. Avoid using plant material that has been sprayed. You don't want any ingredients in your potpourri that could be harmful.

Since the fragrant oils in flowers and leaves fade, fixatives may be added. Orris root is a commonly used fixative. Others are oak moss, clary sage leaves, coriander seeds, bay leaves, cloves, mint leaves, or dried citrus rinds.

Generally you will need to add one tablespoon of fixative per pint of flowers. You may use more than one fixative in your recipe. Spices and herbs are added to further enhance the scent. Some that work well are cinnamon, rosemary, thyme, lemon balm, and allspice. Of these use about one tablespoon per two pints of potpourri.

Essential oils make a stronger scent and again the choice is yours. Rose and lavender oil are only two of many that are available. You only need a few drops of oil to make a big difference so use them sparingly and with respect. Keep these oils out of the reach of children.

Whichever ingredients you select, keep your recipe written down. Then when you come up with the perfect potpourri, you will be able to duplicate it.

I get the most pleasure growing many of my potpourri ingredients. Some items such as the oils and exotic material I buy. There are many books available on potpourri and these will list suppliers of the raw materials as well as companies that will sell you the seeds or plants to get you started on your fragrance garden.

As I mentioned, my fragrance garden supplies many of my potpourri ingredients. I air dry many of the flowers and herbs in my studio. Those that can be are tied in bunches and hung from the rafters or in old wooden wardrobes. The others are placed in single layers on old window screens that I place on sawhorses, or in large baskets. This way the air circulation dries them more quickly. The location should be warm, dry, free of drafts and out of the sun.

The best time to collect the flowers and leaves is on a dry day at least one or two days after it has rained. I find the best time is around 10:00 AM or so after the dew has dried but before the sun dries out the natural oils.

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Experiment with some of the other methods to dry your material: microwave or conventional ovens, silica gel, kitty litter, cornmeal, or borax.

When you're sure that all your plant material is quite dry - about a week to ten days should be plenty - combine them in a large crock or suitable container (not metal). Add your spices, fixatives and essential oils to this, mix well until well blended. (Wear a dust mask when you blend any potpourri so you don't annoy your sinuses or allergies).

Seal and store in a cool, dark place for three to six weeks. Shake or stir it every day. When you feel it's ready, put some into decorative containers with a tight lid or stopper. Open it whenever you wish to perfume the room. Of course, you may put some in an open bowl or basket for the visual appreciation, but the fragrance won't last as long. Sunlight and dust will shorten its life.

I've heard that a capful of brandy or vodka will refresh old potpourri and bring out the scent of the flowers. I use a few drops of the oils instead.

That's just the beginning - use your potpourri to make sachets, herbal pillows, even tussie mussies. Most of all have fun with your fragrance garden.

Resource: McCuen, Marge. "Potpourri and Fragrance Gardens." *Suffolk Living* 9/85.

The author is a Master Gardener volunteer with Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County.

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