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Food & Entertaining

Center of attention

CREATE YOUR OWN FALL FLOWER ARRANGEMENTS

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Whether you are throwing together a Sunday afternoon football party or planning an elegant dinner soiree this fall, consider adding fresh flowers to your shopping list. Almost any social gathering can be brightened by the presence of autumn's vivid blooms.

"The thing about fall is that it's all about color," said William Dotson, manager and head designer at Flowerama in Riverside. "There are so many wonderful colors to be found in everything from flowers to berries to gourds."

With more than 35 years of experience working as a florist, Dotson knows a thing or two about arranging flowers. He shared his ideas with us for creating eye-catching centerpieces and vase arrangements, as well as tips for making them last as long as possible.

Living arrangements

If you'd like to create a flower arrangement that will last longer than cut flowers, a living centerpiece may be the answer. A living centerpiece is a grouping of potted flowers on a tray that can also include items such as pumpkins, gourds, berries and fall leaves.

As the centerpiece's main flowers, Dotson likes to use potted pelee mums. "It's a big daisy with petals that are tri-color or orange and yellow. They are only produced in the fall and everybody carries them," Dotson said. For extra color, he'll typically mix in some croton foliage, which features a tri-color leaf in bright yellows and reds.

Purchase mums in 6-inch or 4-inch pot sizes, depending on how big of an arrangement you are making. "It's great to get them in different colors," Dotson said.

For extra pizzazz, get pumpkins, carve out the centers and drop the

mums down into them, hiding the pots. Leave the pumpkins natural or let your kids draw faces on them. If you're throwing a football party, show your team spirit by painting the pumpkins in your team's colors.

Your tray doesn't have to be fancy — an inexpensive plastic one from the dollar store will do. Camouflage it by covering it with fabric or realistic-looking silk fall leaves. Group the potted flowers and accent with additional items, such as gourds or candles.

For an extra flourish, Dotson recommends adding in berries, either real or artificial. You can drape the stems across the tray or plant them in amongst the mums. You can use cat-tails and wheat similarly, available at florists, grouping them into small bunches using a little bit of wire. If you use natural ones, try spraying them with hairspray to keep them from shedding. As you arrange, keep in mind that you want to vary heights and textures for more visual interest.

Vase arrangements

Dotson's No. 1 rule of thumb regarding flower arranging?

"Less is more," he said. "People tend to overstuff. You want to aim for a more simplistic look."

In the fall, there are numerous kinds of cut flowers available.

Dotson is partial to Gerbera daisies in fall tones. "We're talking oranges, yellows, even reds. There are certain colors in the flowers that you don't get other times of the year. I like to try to put in touches of purple, too," he said.

Mums are always a great fall choice. If you're looking for a variety of colors, try pompom chrysanthemums, which are available in just about any color imaginable. Viking mums look a bit like black-eyed susans, with bright yellow petals and dark centers. Red rover mums have yellow centers with deep red petals. Fuji mums come in fall colors and have long, needle-like petals.

Hydrangeas are always in season and come in a range of colors. Green is trendy right now, Dotson said.

Although you might not typically think of roses as a fall flower, several varieties are available, including some with lovely natural orange and red tints. When purchasing roses, squeeze the head and if it has a bit of a give to it, it should be a good flower. You don't want too hard of a bud or the flower may never bloom.

There is no such thing as a formula, but Dotson had a few ideas on what to include in a fall bouquet, keeping in mind the flowers' colors, textures and sizes. You'll want a large, vocal flower in the center, perhaps a fuji mum or a peony, something with a diameter around four inches. Next, include sub flowers, about 2.5 inches to 3 inches in diameter, something like carnations or Gerbera daisies. Also add in smaller supporting flowers that are maybe 1 inch to 1.5 inches in diameter, maybe alstroemeria. As filler, try aster, baby's breath, or especially for autumn arrangements, stems of hypericum berries. Dotson also likes to include a few line flowers, something that grows vertically, such as snap dragons, delphinium or curly willow branches.

Once you've made your arrangement, you'll want to keep it fresh. Dotson said it's smart to change the vase water every two to three days and give a quick cut to the end of the stems before you put the flowers back in. Fresh water will mean your chrysanthemums might last for weeks. To keep flower-killing bacteria in check, add just a tad of bleach to the water. You should also pour in a bit of a sugary soft drink — like Seven-Up — but no more than a cap full. This will keep the flowers well-fed and your handiwork enjoyable for as long as possible.

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