

The Flower Drying Game - Part 3: An Affordable Home Flower-Press

We've finally reached the end of this 3-part series on drying flowers. If you've gotten this far, you probably already know that small, home-style, do-it-yourself flower presses can be purchased in places like craft stores, well-stocked gift shops, and even some of the big ol' box stores have been known to carry a few now and again.

I've seen the lot...mostly made in some far-distant third-world country, then shipped over here to be sold for a good deal more than they should.

A flower press is really a handy gadget for the craftsperson. It is not only fun to dry and press your own...it can be profitable as well. Our daughter, for example, earned a tidy after-school-spare-time sum making perfectly charming pressed-flower bookmarks that were accepted and marketed in a very nice craft shop. Imagine making your own personalized, laminated and delightfully-charming bookmarks for gifts to friends and relatives. Leaded-glass crafters also employ pressed flowers with good effect in their often jewel-like creations.

Quite literally, anyone with the most basic hand tools—or who has a friend or neighbor with a hand-saw and light-duty drill. The one detailed throughout this article cost a grand total of 88-cents (for the four bolts with wing-nuts and washers) so, you see, this is not an expensive project! A link to pictures of the process appears at the end of this article.

First, locate some scrap pieces of quarter-inch plywood, Masonite or paneling. You'll need three pieces. Color, wood type or finish really doesn't matter. Old, no-longer-used clipboards would be a perfect source. Most basements, attics, garages or barns have stashes of too-nice-to-throw-away wood scraps. Poke around.

Your finished product can be practically any reasonable size—this one will be 5-1/2" by 7" when it's done, but that could vary according to your needs. Don't be fussy about precise measurements—as long as all three pieces are the same size and shape. Most of the flowers you'll be pressing will be fairly small, so there's no point in making one that's jumbo-size.

Cut (or have them cut) to what you think is an appropriate size, then carefully—thoroughly—sand with medium- and then fine-grit sandpaper to remove all rough edges. Splinters can be an uncomfortable reminder if you skip this step. Smooth edges and surfaces will be much better to paint or decorate later on. Now stack all three pieces together and snap 4 or 5 rubber bands around them to hold them in place. Using either a hand or electric drill, drill a 1/4-inch hole about 1/2-inch in from each corner. Hold the drill as close to perpendicular as possible, and drill through all three pieces at the same time, making certain that nothing "slips" in the process, so all the holes line up. I like to file or sand a notch along one edge of all three boards at this point so it's easier to line up the holes when it comes time to actually pressing some blossoms.

Once the holes are done, go back with your sandpaper and smooth-up the rough edges of each hole to remove slivers and "hanging-chads" (sorry, I just had to get that in!). So much for the fun part.

Somewhere in that basement, garage or barn must be some cardboard boxes just waiting for a need to arise. If not, try your local grocery, hardware or appliance store—they'll be happy to let you poke through their recyclables. Use one of the wooden pieces to measure out and mark about a dozen same-size pieces of cardboard and, with either a stout pair of scissors, a yard stick and a craft-knife (being careful not to slice a chunk out of your knee or thumb), or a paper cutter, cut them out. Neatness counts...and be careful you don't slice into the carpet or dining room table.

Do the same thing with about 25 or 30 same-size sheets of newsprint. "Newsprint" is what the daily paper is printed on. Most craft or art supply stores have tablets of blank newsprint that artists sometimes use as sketch pads. You might check with your local daily or weekly newspaper print shop... quite often they'll have what they call butt-ends—leftovers from once-massive rolls of paper that're now too short to put back onto the press. Shouldn't cost more than a dollar or so a pound - and a pound will go a long way. They might even just give you a handful. Most newspaper pressmen will run a few blank-and-folded copies before they begin applying ink, just to make sure everything's lined up. Those blank

newspapers all go into a really big recycling bin. No harm in asking!

I prefer newsprint because fragile dried flowers aren't likely to stick to it because the modern type has a hard surface. Copier paper, on the other hand, is more porous - rough - and delicate petals can hang up in the texture.

Now comes an important step. Remember the holes you drilled in the corners for the bolts? The corners of both the cardboard and newsprint need to be trimmed off to accommodate the hardware. Of course, it should go without saying, but here it comes anyway: be real careful with those scissors! Yes, surgeons can sew fingertips back on, but the process leaves quite a scar—more than a few of us know that from personal experience.

All that's left is to make a trip to your local hardware store and purchase four 4-inch-long, 1/8" bolts (a little smaller or a bit larger doesn't matter - as long as they're long enough), 4 wing-nuts (you can tighten them with your fingers instead of having to use a wrench or pliers) and 8 appropriately-sized washers.

Now What? Easy as pie! The ideal flower to press is one that has very little lumpy-bulk. You wouldn't have much luck, for example, with a rose, daffodil, begonia or cluster of geranium flowers. On the other hand, among the very best are the pansies and violas. Violets, individual florets of geranium and hydrangea seem to be made for pressing. There are many others equally suited to the technique... and don't forget little bits of grass seed heads, small ferns and colorful or interestingly shaped leaves. Let your imagination soar.

Here's how:

- * Slip a washer on each of the four bolts, and slide them through the four holes of one piece of wood. Lay it on a table with the threaded ends of the bolts point up toward the ceiling.
- * Place one sheet of trimmed cardboard, followed by one sheet of newsprint flat on that piece of wood...between the bolts.
- * Now position your flowers so they don't touch each other...watch for bent petals or anything that looks unnatural.
- * Gently place a sheet of newsprint on top of them, followed by another piece of cardboard. Drop in another sheet of newsprint...ready for your next layer of flowers.
- * Continue building up-cardboard, newsprint, flowers, newsprint, cardboard, etc., until you've reached about half-way.
- * Now gently slide a second piece of wood down over the bolts as a rigid, central reinforcement, and continue building layer upon layer until all 12 pieces of cardboard have been used.
- * Finally, slide the last piece of wood over the bolts, slip a washer on each, and spin on the wing nuts until they're snug. It might help at this point to press down on the center of the stack with the heel of your hand while continuing to tighten the nuts.

The purpose here is to gently flatten the flowers...but not crush all the corrugations out of the cardboard. Done? Ok. Now it's time for patience—and dreaming about what you're going to do with your pressed flowers. Place your press with its precious cargo in a dry, room-temperature spot with some air circulation. Keep it away from excessive heat and high humidity...and keep your shirt on.

Because the cardboard has corrugations, air is allowed to move through each of those little "tunnels", evaporating any moisture that's drawn from the flowers by the dry spacing materials. And because the process is really quite rapid, very nearly all of the original flower color is retained.

How long? For very small or light-weight flowers with little moisture, 2 or 3 days is usually sufficient. Thicker petals may take a bit longer. Gently loosen all four wing nuts, remove the first layer of wood and very carefully lift the newsprint by the corner and "peek" at the flowers. If they're dry, you'll know it immediately—they'll lift off easily and, if you're not careful, may blow off the table with the slightest breeze. If they seem to "stick" to the paper, gently put the whole thing back together and wait another couple of days.

So, what do you do now? We started out using clear, adhesive vinyl sold as shelf-paper. Later, we purchased a plastic laminator at Staples for just under \$100. Most copy-shops ("Quick-Prints") have laminators and will be happy to seal just about anything you bring in that'll fit into their machine. Some of these big machines use a hot-process...some cold. I personally don't think it matters. I know some industrious crafters who use the same plastic-sealing pouches (Staples, again) and a dry clothing iron set just a little shy of the hottest setting. A very flat surface and a sheet of stiff, smooth paper on either side should do the trick. If it were me, I'd try it a couple of times before wading in with my very nicest pressed flower specimens!

Finally, don't forget to look at photos of this process using the link, below. When you get there, click on each photo to see a closer view. Enjoy! And why not share your pressed-flower bookmarks with a book-lover or shut-in. They will be appreciated!

You'll find pictures of flower press parts and assembly at <http://www.hillgardens.com/dry-photos.htm>, and view the list of Fred's other articles at: http://ezinearticles.com/?expert=Fred_Davis

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