



NEW IDEAS IN
PRESSED LEAVES
AND FLOWERS



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THE ART OF PRESSED LEAVES



ESSENTIALS

Collecting

Almost every time I go for a walk, I am on the lookout for suitable leaves and flowers to collect. I am very familiar with my locality, and I particularly look forward to the early spring to see how plants have fared over the winter. There is always the risk that some may have been lost due to environmental damage, or they may have just disappeared.

Some plants keep growing throughout the winter, some even flowering unexpectedly, like red campion (*Silene dioica*). The seasons are changing, with trees and plants reported to be flowering up to a month early in some parts of the country.

Suitable leaves and flowers can be found everywhere, from beautiful gardens to woodland and wasteland. It is important to collect material as it appears; it won't always be there, and it is a long year's wait in most cases for the plants to appear again. I have to remember to visit certain places at the right time of year to collect what I need, which is why record-keeping is important; I always note where and when I have collected certain flowers or leaves.

It takes a while to process the material and arrange it in the pressing book, so it's important not to collect too much at once. Keep flowers separate from leaves – in a small container or different bags – as the flowers can be damaged by the heavier leaf material.

Not everything is suitable for pressing, so I always avoid conifers, most evergreen shrubs and complicated flowers. Always be on the lookout for leaves with insect damage or unusual spots as these can have very interesting textures and colours.

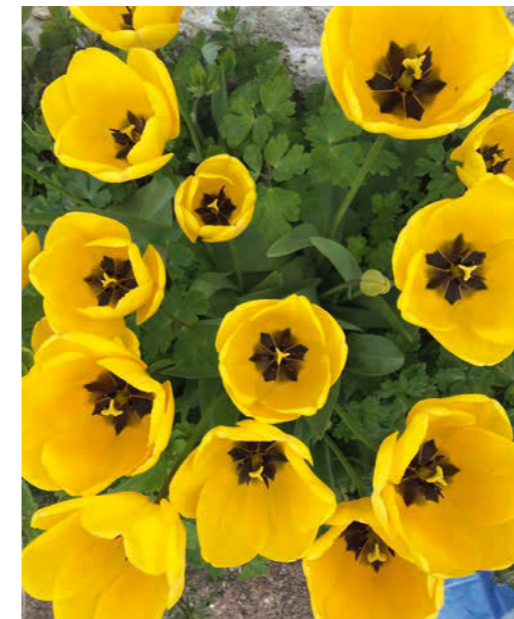
BELOW LEFT Tulips press very well if you separate the petals; they have a lovely silky quality.

BELOW CENTRE *Ginkgo biloba* leaves in a Welsh arboretum; a beautiful yellow that presses well and keeps its colour.

BELOW RIGHT Japanese Rose (*Rosa rugosa*). The large pink petals found on this very common rose keep their magenta colour very well.



LEFT Hyssington landscape (2024), 30 x 40 cm (12 x 16 in)



I pick everything when it is dry: wet leaves and flowers do not press well and go mouldy. From time to time, I will find something that is damp, especially during the winter, and this material can be dried between sheets of newspaper, weighed down with something heavy, before moving to the pressing book. It is also possible to dry individual leaves with kitchen paper.

I am careful to pick only very small quantities of wild flowers unless they are very prolific and common, like daisies or buttercups for example. I never collect anything unusual. These days I am more likely to collect small leaves and give the flowers a miss, leaving them to the bees and butterflies.

I grow a number of wild plants in my garden, and this makes collecting much easier, for example selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*), silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*), bedstraws, daisies (*Bellis perennis*), ferns and sweet woodruff (*Galium odoratum*).

It is important to ask permission if collecting from a special garden or park. Gardeners are usually only too happy to share some of their treasures, and I find this is a good way of finding new and interesting material. If I collect from a private garden, I usually give the owner a small finished leafwork or perhaps some cards as a thank you. Public gardens, arboretums and parks are a great way of finding special plants and new discoveries.

I have far too many pressed leaves in store, but I continue to stockpile my favourites! However, I do find that some of the older material becomes brittle and therefore not suitable for use, and from time to time I have a big clear-out.



ABOVE LEFT Hydrangea flowers and autumn reds, collected and waiting to be pressed.

LEFT A bag of autumn leaves waiting to be sorted and pressed.

RIGHT Wet maple leaves on a layer of newspaper, ready for another layer to be placed on the top, weighed down with a couple of heavy books.



LEFT Beech leaves showing a lovely variety of colour.

TOP Leaves showing interesting lines made by the leaf miner beetle.

ABOVE Beautiful flowers of potentilla 'Miss Wilmot' showing their very useful heart-shaped petals.



TOP RIGHT Willow leaves showing good texture.



RIGHT Dandelion sepals after the seeds have been removed.

Pressing

Make sure everything collected is dry, and cut woody stems from leaves if necessary. Large leaves can be cut into pieces to fit in the pressing book.

I use old large telephone books to press leaves and flowers in. Any large-sized old book will do, even a catalogue or magazine.

Place the material between two sheets of photocopying paper, starting at the back of the book. Allow at least 2 cm (1½ in) between each layer. There is no need to fill the book in one go, just add leaves and flowers gradually as necessary.

Small things, like parts of flowers or complicated seed heads like honesty, take a while to process. This involves separating the small flowers from the stems, as in elderflowers, a lovely summer crop. The heads of elderflowers are composed of hundreds of tiny white flowers, which are beautiful to use when pressed. It takes a while to divide the individual flowers from the stems. Keep this in mind when out collecting. Try not to bring home a huge bag of elderflowers as you will find it takes too long to deal with them all. Of course, you can always make elderflower wine instead!

The pressing book has to be weighed down with something heavy, with other books or heavy weights of some kind, whether it is full or not. This has to be left somewhere dry and undisturbed. If weight is not applied, the leaves will not press flat, and the material will be wasted. The pressing book has to be left for a couple of months; however, it is possible to carefully check how things are going.

ABOVE LEFT Summer garden petals and flower heads, including daisies and hardy geraniums, in between the pages of a pressing book laid on a sheet of photocopying paper, with another sheet to be placed on top.

LEFT Telephone books weighed down with two heavy books, showing layers of pressed material, clearly labelled, between photocopying paper.

RIGHT Autumn hawthorn leaves in pressing book.



I always label everything I collect with the name of the plant and when and where the material was found. With a small collection, it is easy to remember where flowers and leaves were found, but I collect a lot of material during a year and I have to label everything. It saves a lot of time searching for things.

Another way to itemize everything is to press all of the same plant in one book, ash leaves for example. I also differentiate between wild and garden material as this makes everything easier to find.

When ready, I keep the pressed leaves in the books to store them, and I usually have up to eighty books full of material ready to use. I collect far too much and eventually I have to store some leaves and flowers in plastic wallets in drawers.



ABOVE Elderflowers being prepared for pressing by separating the individual flowers.

LEFT Elderflowers being prepared for pressing by separating the individual flowers.

RIGHT Parts of geranium flowers.

BELOW Rosebay willow flowers after they have been detached from the main stem to make pressing easier.



Basic materials

Working with pressed leaves and flowers requires very little equipment, but it is a good idea to give yourself a space to work in and to store your dried material where it will be kept dry and undisturbed. It is easier to work on smaller pieces of card or paper when you first start exploring making leaf collages. I began by making pieces of work no larger than 15 × 15 cm.

Paper and card

I always use a good quality watercolour paper of medium weight, not too heavily textured, or mountboard, which comes in different colours and can be cut to size as necessary.

You can try other cards and papers, just remember not to use thin paper as it will warp when the adhesive is applied. Thin paper can be glued to a piece of card and then used as a background for a leaf collage. All kinds of paper and card are available and it is always possible to make your own paper, adding flowers and leaves to the mix, which can result in some very beautiful effects.

Pressed leaves can also be applied to other surfaces like wood or plaster. Using a glue stick, it is possible to apply pressed leaves to decorate wooden boxes, furniture and even a wooden floor. The leaves would have to be given several coats of varnish to protect the design. This traditional technique is called decoupage, and in the past it has been used to decorate furniture with paper cut-outs or pictures. I think this is an area that could be explored using pressed leaves and flowers.

Adhesives

Copydex is a rubber-based adhesive and is the only adhesive I use for pressed leaves and flowers. Always squeeze out a small amount onto a piece of card or a tile, or something similar. I apply the adhesive to the pressed piece with a sharpened matchstick which ensures only a small amount is used – too much glue can spread onto the paper. It can be removed when dry, but there is a risk of damaging the dried material. Small bits of unwanted adhesive can also be removed using the matchstick or just by carefully rubbing. When applying adhesive to delicate petals and other thin material, use tiny dots of the glue.



ABOVE Pressed ferns on different papers and coloured card.

ABOVE LEFT Handmade paper

LEFT Applying copydex adhesive to a cut square using a matchstick.