

# Kinder mechanics

The campaign to reduce plastics in everything from carrier bags to drinking straws has turned a spotlight on the use of ecologically harmful substances in the floral design industry. With florists and flower arrangers sending tonnes of their plastic and foam-based mechanics to landfill every year, we look at some of the alternatives that are potentially kinder to the planet

Every flower arranger knows that the mechanics of a floral design are as important as the flowers and foliage themselves. The right mechanics can make the difference between a design that holds up for just the day of a competition, and another that keeps on giving for a week.

But, while modern foam-based products, with their clever, custom-designed bases, are a boon in terms of convenience and time saving, it seems that more and more designers are beginning to question their use. Many of these products contain formaldehyde and resin foams, and they are routinely used along with petroleum-based ribbons, tapes and containers – most of which end up in landfill since they are largely non-biodegradable.

## Changing attitudes

As a reflection of the change in attitudes, wholesalers like Yvonne Viggers at Excelsior Wholesale in Tamworth, are reporting increasing sales of traditional wreath frames made from natural branches, along with 1970s-style ‘wood slice’ bases, and bunches of willow stems which arrangers are using to create their own frames and structures.

One of her regular customers, Julie Storey of Nuneaton Flower Club, says she’s enjoying re-discovering some of the materials she used to work with when she first began flower arranging almost 25 years ago – such as natural branches, mosses and barks.

She credits a recent demonstrator at her club for opening her eyes to the issue of over-use of floral foam, and says she now consciously considers more natural alternatives.

WORDS Jackie McCarrick



Whenever she does opt for foam, she re-uses it in designs as often as she can get away with, and then, at the end of its life, even uses it for rooting plants, or puts it as a water-retaining bottom layer in her garden plant tubs.

## Greener floral foam

Similarly, Ron Heath, who runs Floral Mechanics in Bristol says that the new eco-friendly foam product launched this year by industry giant Smithers-Oasis is a welcome step in the right direction, despite being only partly biodegradable. The company says its OASIS® Bio Floral Foam Maxlife is the result of years of development and was launched in response to changing trends, and customer demands, along with its NatureBase range of biodegradable bases that look, feel and perform like plastic, but are made from sustainable materials.

Heath says the plastics issue is a challenge for the whole horticultural industry, with its reliance on single-use plant pots and trays, as well as throwaway floristry mechanics such

as trays, tribute frames, plasticised tapes and wires and those single-use plastic ‘frogs’. He and his wife, who run sales tables at flower club events, are fans of the good, old-fashioned pin holder alternative, a re-useable option that will pay for itself many times over.

## European influence

For Herefordshire-based NAFAS national demonstrator Carola Wilson, the shift away from foam and plastic owes a lot to the growing influence of designers from Germany and Belgium, who rarely use them. “I think we in the UK have been guilty of over-relying on foam, especially in church and cathedral displays” she says. So strong is her belief in planet-friendly floral design that she’s also working with a specialist company on producing a biodegradable flower gift box, and related products. In her own work, she uses lots of willow to create structures into which she can feed floral stems or incorporate glass tubes as flower holders.

## No foam workshops

Another sign of the awareness comes from award-winning florist, teacher and demonstrator Heidi Lawley, who has attracted eager students to her ‘no foam’ floral workshops, held at her flower school in Kent, where she shows how to create flower design structures using twisted branches or scrunched copper mesh as a base for weaving and threading through flower stems.

Having grown up on a farm in Shropshire, Heidi says: “I love to capture nature and movement in my floral designs, so for me, the less artificial material I can use, the better.”

## Mechanical genius: eco-friendly ways to work with flowers

- Adding a layer of pebbles, sand, gravel, shells or marbles to the bottom quarter or third of a container can provide enough ballast to hold stems securely.



- Pliable twigs, moss-covered branches or contorted willow can be 'wrapped' securely inside even a low vase to create a kind of basket weave framework that will hold flower stems.
- Perhaps one of the easiest techniques for creating a foam-free container arrangement involves placing equally-spaced, crossing rows of strong sticky tape over the top of the vase, to create a 'grid' into which flower stems can be slotted.



- Those old-fashioned flower 'frogs' that were so popular in the days before foam are being rediscovered by a new generation. Ideal for stabilising woody material, they come in ceramic, glass or metal, and vintage ones can often be picked up cheaply at bric-a-brac shops or car boot sales.

- Another time-honoured way to stabilise designs in a large-mouthed container is to make an open sphere of chicken wire and ease it carefully inside the neck to hold stems. For a see-through container, a more aesthetic alternative might be scrunched Cellophane (see right) or copper mesh.

- For industrially-inspired designs, a DIY store can be the source of some great alternative mechanics with strong visual impact: everything from copper tubes and steel rods to nuts and bolts, plaster of Paris, electrical tubing and duct tape, can be utilised to anchor or suspend stems, and form part of the visible display.

- Those traditional flat wire frames that rather fell out of favour with the advent of foam bases are also being rediscovered by newcomers to flower arranging – along with the all-important skills of mossing, wiring, soaking and pinning them prior to use.



- So-called 'wood wool' (shown below) – the shredded wood material commonly used for packaging bottles and other fragile products – makes an unexpectedly effective base material, and looks good with the fibres carefully teased out to form part of a design.

