

DESIGN & DECORATING

ERROR, ERROR ON THE WALL

There's a Right Way to Bouquet

Want to make fresh flowers a habit? Pros weigh in on the worst amateur arranging mistakes.

By SARAH KARNASIEWICZ

TEMPTING BLOOMS are everywhere this time of year, but if you want to create a truly swoon-worthy display, you can't just pluck a fistful of tulips from a bucket at the store and stick them in a vase. Kiara Hancock, a floral designer in Tacoma, Wash., suggests at-home arrangers take inspiration from outside: "Look at a garden—some bits stand out, some stems are tucked below, nothing is the same height or shape—and build bouquets the same way." Here, she and other pros elaborate on the blunders that often derail amateurs, and how to avoid them.

Poor Prep

"One mistake is that people buy a bundle of flowers, snip the stems, and that's it," said T.J. McGrath, a sustainable floral designer in Plainfield, N.J.

Instead Gabriela Salazar, a floral designer in Valle de Bravo, Mexico, and author of the new book "The Artistry of Flowers" (Rizzoli), begins by laying flowers flat to examine their shapes and pinpoint details to highlight by leaving certain blooms taller or giving them certain space. McGrath agrees. "Separate out the most interesting ones"—think of them as your stars—"and let those be your guide."

Unvaried Vessels

Don't default to some dull, leftover glass vase. Whether your vessel is too petite for brawny sunflowers or too capacious for delicate sweet-peas, a mismatched pairing of vase and blooms can sink an arrangement, says florist Sandra Sigman, owner of Les Fleurs, in Andover, Mass., and author of the recently released "French Blooms" (Rizzoli). **Instead** As a rule of thumb, the tallest flower in an arrangement should be twice the height of its container, says Sigman. For versatility, Lindsey Taylor, a garden designer, writer, and artist in Newburgh, N.Y. and author of the forthcoming book "Art in Flower" (Monacelli), suggests be-

ginners build a vase library including a bud vase, pitcher, tall cylinder, low bowl and, for oversize branches, a crock. Sigman urges creativity: "Look around your house and see what you can reuse. If it holds water, it can be a beautiful vessel."

Color Run Amok

"Wild, multicolor arrangements can work—but think of them as level 10, not 1," said McGrath.

Instead Sticking to a color scheme of related shades—ranging say, from deep orange dahlias to creamy cosmos—is a bulletproof route to harmony, he explained. Monofloral ar-

Be creative: 'If it holds water, it can be a beautiful vessel.'

rangements are another stylish way to explore scale and shapes. "You can learn so much with just one type of flower. A perfectly balanced bunch of ranunculus can be so chic."

Sloppy Scents

Fragrant lilies in the kitchen? Not the best move, says Hancock. Not only can aggressively perfumed blooms throw off the flavors of food, many people find them actively nauseating.

Instead Deploy assertive flowers like hyacinth and paperwhites sparingly and strategically in places like powder rooms, says Sigman, and incorporate soothing scented herbs—like rosemary, mint and lavender—into everyday arrangements.

No Breathing Room

It's easy to get carried away and wind up overstuffing your bouquet. Impressive designs are about much more than volume, explains McGrath.

Instead Place flowers with negative space in mind, creating loose flow from the highest point of the arrangement to the lowest. "Air is essential," he said. "Remember, you're also designing what isn't there."



BALANCED BLOOMS Massachusetts florist Sandra Sigman paired dramatic delphiniums with a rustic vintage bucket.

THE WILD BUNCH / MORE FLORAL 'DON'TS' AND DISASTERS FROM THE PROS



▲ **"To be clear,** that little packet of 'food' that comes with bouquets should be sprinkled into the water you're setting the flowers in, not onto

the blooms. I actually saw someone do that once and it ate right through the petals!" —Kiara Hancock, floral designer, Tacoma, Wash.

"Keeping flowers in a cool, dark place can help them last longer. Unfortunately, one customer decided to put them in her freezer and then called in tears the next day when they all turned black and died."

—Sandra Sigman, owner of Les Fleurs, in Andover, Mass., and author of "French Blooms" (Rizzoli)

"I take walks with my clippers every day, and if I see something beautiful, I'll knock on a door. But I've learned the hard way not to cut from someone else's garden

during daylight or without permission—you don't want some homeowner coming after you with a wooden spoon!"

—T.J. McGrath, sustainable floral designer, Plainville, N.J.

"A woman recently asked me which flowers are deadly to children. Her husband was attending a father-daughter dance and was concerned about their daughter accidentally ingesting part of his boutonniere. That was definitely a first!"

—Sandra Sigman

CHIC TRICK

And the Rattan Played On

To extend the life of tired woven porch furniture, snazz it up with glossy paint in a bright renewing hue



DIAMOND BACKS Atlanta designer Mallory Mathison highlighted chairs with deep green lacquer.

The Appeal

Giving a motley collection of rattan furniture a new color can bestow it with both coherence and charisma. New York City architect Gil Schafer did just that to some dispa-

rate seats and tables on a porch in southern Georgia (right). The gleaming red paint unified the mismatched antique pieces, he said, and brought a "kick of color" to a space otherwise outfitted with

a gray floor, white walls and dark green shutters. Why did he choose gloss? "Matte would collect pollen and dust more readily than a surface with sheen," said Schafer. He also touts lacquer's tactile ap-

peal. "In a house, for example, the walls may be painted in a flat finish, but we give door trim a satin finish because you're more likely to touch the trim, and it feels better with a sheen." The gleam beat a lackluster finish aesthetically too. "The lacquer is more lively, which is part of the fun of [painting] it, right?" he said.

Mallory Mathison also likes to give humble wicker and rattan the "Eliza Doolittle" treatment. "I love the idea of doing a lacquered wicker chair in a city apartment with a totally unexpected cushion fabric, like silk velvet or brocade," said the Atlanta interior designer. "It's a little more polished and formal."

Around a table on the back porch of a Mary Esther, Fla., home (left), Mathison convened 10 rattan chairs she'd coated in a shiny, deep green. The 1960s-era seats give the newly built house a veneer of history, and, in the rich hue, their open diamond-weave backs pop against the white porch in a way natural rattan couldn't. Lacquer highlights the shape, said Mathison, and "gives it a strong graphic quality."

The Tips While you can easily expend a few thousand dollars for a new rattan dining set or a vintage ensemble via high-end antique purveyors like Chairish or 1stDibs, you needn't. According to Mathison, flea markets and antique malls can yield good buys, especially in areas like the shores of New England and the Carolinas—natural habitats for wicker and rattan. She and



Red lacquer unified a collection of mismatched rattan, says New York City architect Gil Schafer of this porch in Georgia.

her client scored the seats she used in the Mary Esther project on the Gulf Coast of Florida, paying about \$50 a piece.

As for the lacquering, Schafer admits that spraying them yourself demands a bit of skill, but contends that "it's actually a very DIY kind of thing." Mathison notes that success is a matter of getting the right coating (consult with your local paint store) and applying several light layers rather than a single heavy coat.

Alternatively, you can pay a professional with a spray booth to lacquer them. In Atlanta, Mathison said, painting a table and four chairs would

run about \$1,200. Juan Alvarado, a furniture finisher in the Bronx, N.Y., says he would charge \$1,800 for the same job.

The Caveats Wicker is a hassle to strip. Though you can get the pieces coated in the first place without exorbitant expense, should you have a change of heart, the price for restoring them to their original finish might sting a bit. "Whatever you paid to have the furniture sprayed, it will cost you double that to have them brought back to natural," said Alvarado.

—Catherine Romano