



Making Potpurri

What You Need to Know

Dried plant materials retain some of their perfume long after drying. Potpourris are mixtures of flowers, leaves, fruits, essential oils, and fixatives which capitalize on the fragrance of dried materials. They can be used to freshen rooms, in sachets, and can be given as gifts.

Traditionally, there are two types of potpourri; wet, and dry. The former method uses damp plant material. The word potpourri is derived from the French for "rotten pot." The method outlined below is the dried method. You can use a wide range of dried materials, and many suggested here are surprisingly easy to find. The potpourri will take about 6 weeks to become fully fragrant.

This activity can be enjoyed by a wide range of participants, regardless of ability. "Aroma-therapy" has recently become very popular. For older participants, the pleasant scents of potpourri ingredients will bring back pleasant memories. However, because it will smell delicious, some participants may be tempted to taste the potpourri. Some of the essential oils may be irritating, so take care that the potpourri is not eaten. If you think this may be a problem for your participants, don't use essential oils or fixatives; you will find that a mixture of aromatic flowers, herbs, and dried fruit will make a satisfactory potpourri. People with allergic reactions to strong odors, or compromised respiratory capacity, may not be suited for some parts of this activity.

Most potpourris contain flowers that smell good and are pretty to look at. For this activity, collect as many dried flowers, leaves, berries, etc. as you like. You will need to purchase a few materials, but most can be collected in the wild, saved from old bouquets, or found in most kitchens. If you plan this activity in advance, have families and friends help out by doing some of the collecting, saving flowers from their gardens, lawns, or from florists' bouquets. Flowers used in potpourri do not have to be as fresh as they do for pressed or dried flowers, so you can use the imperfect blossoms you have left over from other activities.

Materials Needed

- Plant materials (see recipes below for ideas)
- Shallow corrugated-cardboard cartons/trays like the flat corrugated trays that six-packs of soda and beer come in.
- Sealed containers for storage
- Essential oils and fixatives (oils and fixatives such as orris root are available from hobby/craft stores or herb shops) if desired

If you cannot find orris root powder, leave it out, or substitute 1/2 the amount of cinnamon. The effect will not be the same, but will be pleasant nevertheless!



Making the Potpurri

Potpourris are very easy to make, and because they do not require a high level of manual dexterity, many people can participate meaningfully.

Begin by pulling apart large blossoms or sprays of flowers, or plucking smaller blossoms off their stems. Peony blossoms make a great base for potpourri because they are large blossoms, easy to handle, and they are readily available.

Pull the blossoms apart and spread the petals thinly in a shallow cardboard box. The cardboard boxes can be stacked criss-cross on each other to save use of counter space. Peony petals feel wonderful to stir, and they cannot really be damaged, so have participants stir the petals every day. On the other hand, rose petals, the "traditional" basis of potpourri, may be difficult to find, pick, and handle.

Of course, feel free to include them if you have a ready supply, because they smell and feel wonderful.

Lots of wildflowers and lawn flowers are easy to find in large quantities and wonderful in potpourri. Sweet clover, (ordinary white clover blossoms can be saved from your lawn clippings), birdsfoot trefoil, wild sweetpea, red clover, wild yarrow, wild strawberries, and even goldenrod, are a few of the successful potpourri ingredients.

Blue and purple flowers are very attractive in potpourri, but chicory is a disappointing addition.

Pansies and Johnny jump-ups dry beautifully if you place them carefully, facedown in a cardboard six-pack box.

Let them dry completely before handling. Include aromatic foliage as well.

Any type of mint -- wild or domestic spearmint leaves, lemon balm, even wild catnip, are all welcomed additions to potpourris, wonderful for participants to handle and stir as the leaves dry.

Yarrow leaves, juniper or balsam fir sprigs are also some different greens. Ferns taken from wilted floral arrangements and pulled into small pieces are good in potpourris.

The trick is to collect and "create" your potpourri throughout the growing season. Continue to dry blossoms and leaves in shallow layers (stirred daily) in the stacked-up boxes. After a batch is dry, pour it into a large plastic bag or other airtight container and store it carefully (out of direct light). By fall, you will have a wondrous assortment ready for participants to make their own potpourri.

Not enough flower petals?

Add some colorful pine shavings (from a pet store) tinted with unsweetened powdered drink mix. Strawberry makes red; fruit punch makes rose; lime makes bright green. (Don't try grape, it turns items gray.)

Take an envelope of drink mix and place it in a jar with about 1/2 cup of water. Stir to dissolve.

Pour in a couple of big handfuls of pine shavings.

Push shavings into the liquid and let it stand for a few minutes, overnight, or for a week.

Pour out the liquid, spread the shavings in a cardboard six-pack box and let them dry.

The shavings make a very pretty addition to your potpourri mix.

Of course, you can use food coloring in water, but the drink mix may be less expensive.

Recipes

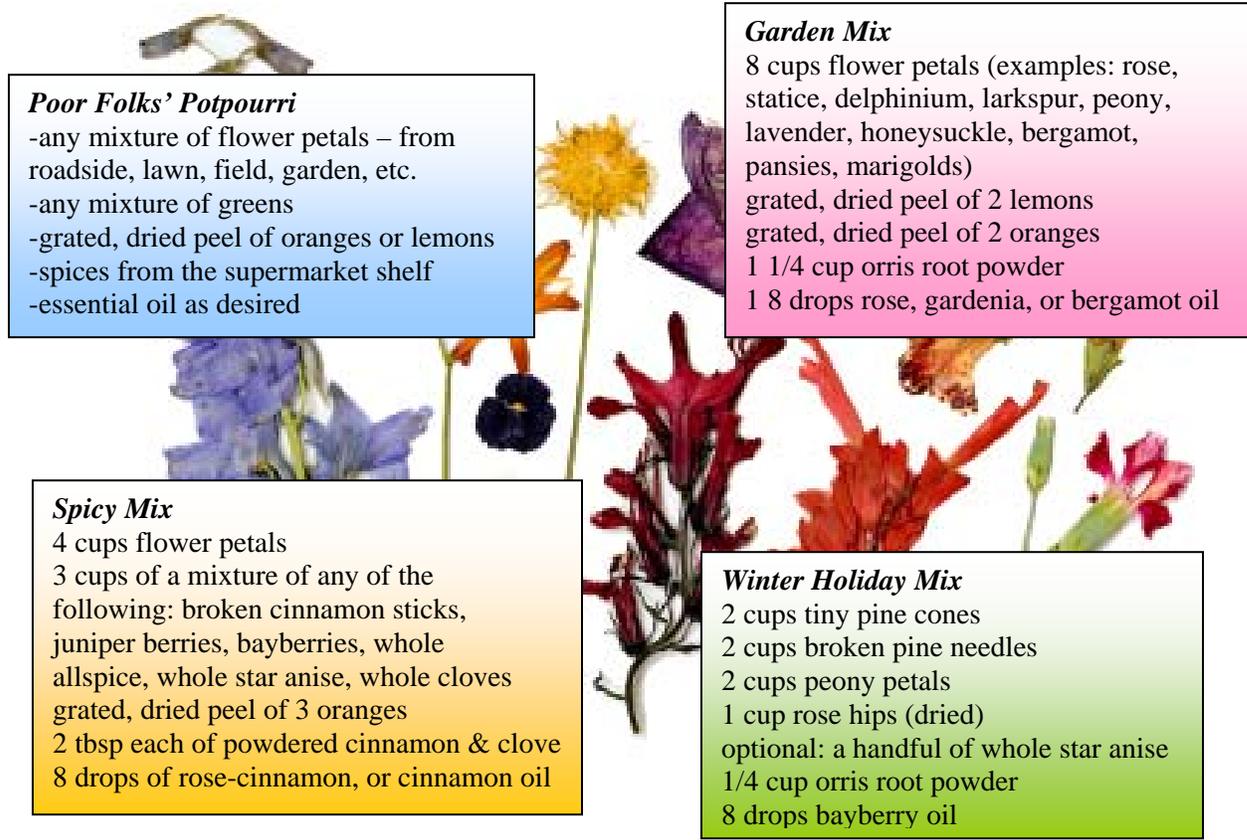
After you have assembled your ingredients (see recipes below), you simply layer the materials in a wide container, beginning with the largest ingredient, e.g., the flowers, leaves, berries, twigs, etc. Sift a small amount of the fixative (usually in the form of a spice such as orris root, cinnamon, or cloves) over the first layer of flowers.

Add a drop or two of essential oil, and continue with the layers. Seal the container, and set in a cool, dry place for about 6 weeks.

Participants can also make their own individual potpourri in babyfood jars, plastic bowls, margarine tubs, small disposable plastic containers or cups, covered with a lid or plastic wrap (taped to make sure it stays sealed.) Zip-lock bags can also be used for individual potpourris. Participants can select ingredients from an array on a table, add a drop or two of oil, seal the container, and each person can have a special, unique potpourri.

Make sure that participants can maneuver the potpourri ingredients into their own container, using hands, scoops, or plastic cups; assistance from a staff person may reduce frustration. Putting the containers on a non-skid surface (non-slip shelf lining is inexpensive and readily available) may also help.

Use the following recipes as a general guideline, but feel free to add whatever you like!



Poor Folks' Potpourri

- any mixture of flower petals – from roadside, lawn, field, garden, etc.
- any mixture of greens
- grated, dried peel of oranges or lemons
- spices from the supermarket shelf
- essential oil as desired

Garden Mix

- 8 cups flower petals (examples: rose, statice, delphinium, larkspur, peony, lavender, honeysuckle, bergamot, pansies, marigolds)
- grated, dried peel of 2 lemons
- grated, dried peel of 2 oranges
- 1 1/4 cup orris root powder
- 1 8 drops rose, gardenia, or bergamot oil

Spicy Mix

- 4 cups flower petals
- 3 cups of a mixture of any of the following: broken cinnamon sticks, juniper berries, bayberries, whole allspice, whole star anise, whole cloves
- grated, dried peel of 3 oranges
- 2 tbsp each of powdered cinnamon & clove
- 8 drops of rose-cinnamon, or cinnamon oil

Winter Holiday Mix

- 2 cups tiny pine cones
- 2 cups broken pine needles
- 2 cups peony petals
- 1 cup rose hips (dried)
- optional: a handful of whole star anise
- 1/4 cup orris root powder
- 8 drops bayberry oil