



Flower Arranging for Men

A Handy Guide

by Andrew Carey

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Ideation and creative expression are a function of the organism in the environment within the context of the various juicy affordances offered by the enveloping ecosystem and the various micro-sociosystems that it contains.

For that reason, it is necessary either to name as co-facilitators of the creative process organisms, events and structures as widely varied as the Jurassic Coast, a strand of mycelium, a dog, the author's magnificent babies and their consorts, Move into Life with Sandra Reeve and the author's first sight of his mother's stockings leg --- or to name none of them. The latter course has been chosen for reasons of space and Lacanian orthodoxy as well as to avoid anything invidious in the acknowledging department.



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Hi,

In my opinion, D.P. Gumby did us all an enormous disservice when he suggested that men were so profoundly boorish and insensitive that we couldn't even manage to put the flowers in a vase the right way up (i.e. stalks go in first).

If you don't remember him, Gumby was one of Michael Palin's characters in the Monty Python shows and he famously made a bit of a mess of some on-camera flower arranging.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a huge Python fan and used to be able to recite entire sketches (not just the Dead Parrot sketch, though that *is* great, isn't it?). Of course, I moved on to Hitchhiker's Guide, which was just in a different league. Anyway, that's slightly dated me and may have slightly foxed you, which is a shame because I'm really keen for this handy guide to engage you. (That's why I keep on using the word 'you' --- it's an old marketing trick but it works, don't you think?)

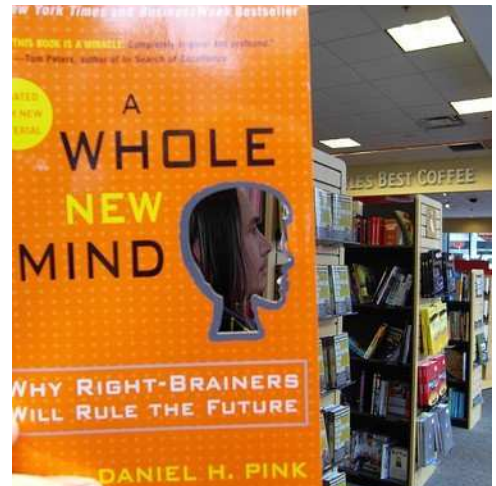
I maintain that the effect of comments like Gumby's has been deeply damaging for men (and, indeed, for women --- who need us to be strong and confident, even if they don't necessarily like it if we get too cocksure). Just as the impact of whoever it was who first said that men couldn't multitask has been like the ripples in a millpond from when someone thoughtlessly throws a darn great rock into it.

If you doubt me, Google "flower arranging for men" and you'll find that just 21 results are returned (some of them to this book, which is fantastic).

Revealingly, one of the links is to the annual flower show at the lovely village of Hornton in Oxfordshire, which had a special *Flower Arranging for Men* category in 2004. The category was never repeated. I wonder why! Incidentally, my friend Milner Caroline lives near Hornton.

Anyway, my contention is that, by stereotyping flower arranging as a pastime suitable only for women (especially members of the WI) and some gay bottoms (in the technical sense), proper men are being denied a chance to explore their right brain potential.

Talking of brains, Dan Pink (great guy, great name) has written a book showing why we need to be good at communicating, empathy and being creative --- not just maths, rugby and crosswords. Dan was a speechwriter for Al Gore who was so tall that some people he was talking to didn't even realise he was being empathic.



When I went to hear Dan talk to a small, very select group of sensitive people at *The Economist*, he told us about some spectacles that had been invented for people on the autistic spectrum (which is how we should say it now) --- by the way, I also read that we should say 'thought showers' instead of 'brainstorming'. I think that's a great idea, as brainstorming must sound bad for people who have brainstorms or who are apoplectic with brain energy or whatever. But when it was reported in *The Daily Mail*, one reader said: "How stupid is that... on a scale from 1 to 10 I would say at least 15." Which says something about *Daily Mail* readers!



Anyway, back to the spectacles.

Apparently, they have a miniature camera built into the nose bridge, which takes regular pictures of the person to whom our autistic-spectrum spectacle-wearer is talking and sends them to a processor in the arm of the spectacles. This processor matches the pictures against a database of photos of people looking bored or angry. If it finds a match it gives the wearer a small electric shock in the temple to alert him (because it almost invariably *is* a him) to the fact that he is boring or enraging his interlocutor.

I still think this is the most fantastic invention ever. But isn't it treating the symptom rather than the problem? Surely what's needed is something that'll put men on the autistic spectrum more in touch with their empathic, feeling side? Enter flower arranging... For me, it's been a fabulous way of building my social skills repertoire. Here are some of the ways it's improved my life:

1. I'll often pick flowers and arrange them for a special meal. Many females have complimented me on this and, I think, like me better because of it.
2. The simple act of asking permission of a plant to pick its flowers and then thanking the remains of the plant puts me in touch with my surroundings and helps me empathise with amputees and *mutilés de guerre* (we don't even have a word for them in English, but they have their own seats on the Paris métro. Who says the Common Market has stamped out cultural difference?)



3. When I first read *The Power of Now*, I often wondered how I could slow down and come into the present, staying focused on my inner core, my spiral connection to the earth below and the universe above and my immediate environment. Turns out, flower arranging is just the job!

4. It's great for building awareness of colour and of the fragility of vases.

In short, flower arranging has helped me bring my right brain to the fore and it's loosened up my creativity so I can really push the envelope – it's as if I'm in the envelope and pushing out with my arms and legs until it would burst if it weren't a padded one.



So, over the years I've worked a lot with flowers of a great many species and varieties and I think it's really important to start with the right flowers and the right container. E.g., if you're a beefy rigger player you can easily force your fist into a fragile vase, right the way up to the elbow sometimes, and get it stuck there. That's horrid and can be really embarrassing.

Equally, if you're a builder or artisan with exceptionally big hands or fat fingers you probably can't perform delicate manual operations. It's a fact of life, just like I couldn't be a dentist because I'd be sick on people. So it's not funny and it must make so many things really hard. (Maybe that's why builders often don't wear shirts with buttons? Think about it. Would *you*?)



So that leads me in nicely to my rules of flower arranging, which I've tried to keep chatty and not too formal (because you'll soon find out that we need to make this fun):



Rule 1: Don't start with a too delicate container – i.e. not too small and not too frangible (another word for easily breakable).

I like to use those rubberised buckets you can get now in shops. They're called pails. I use them for my washing and if there's been a big mess in the house. This is a great pic of a pail --- kindly supplied by the manufacturer. I'm using it here to highlight my list of rules. It makes them bucket points rather than bullet points!!

Of course, you don't need to use a black one, but this gives you an idea. We're certainly not talking about your Mum's finest Wedgwood or a bit of Ming (isn't it interesting how that word's changed its meaning!).



Rule 2: Don't start off with really pretty or dainty or expensive flowers - it's potentially a waste of money and can frighten a guy.



Think about it. If your first attempt at flower arranging means manipulating *Thunbergia*, you're going to worry about snapping some off and how much they cost. Also it can be as if they're winking at you and that can be a bit upsetting. And let's face it, they're pretty and, to my mind, pretty off-putting for some men. Especially big guys.

So, especially if you're facilitating for a first-time flower-arranger, try to suggest flowers that he can pick himself in the hedgerow, maybe when he's having a wee. That way he'll know they're free and he'll know where to get more if he muffs things up. But remember it's against the law to pick wild flowers, so make sure he only picks wild flowers that have naturalised themselves in your garden. Lucky you if you've got mature hedgerows in your garden!



Rule 3: Don't start off with too many flowers, that's just a recipe for worrying about whether to use a pyramidal arrangement or other architectural device --- or how many different colours and species to mix.

What I'm saying, of course, is keep it simple (or KIS for short).

Not because men can't cope with complicated arrangements, but it's like learning to drive a car. You just start with the steering wheel, don't you? Then maybe later you go on to the pedals and then finally the gears.

So, rather than having a whole array of flowers to choose from, just have maybe three or four ready to arrange in the vase.

Sound too easy? Believe you me, there's plenty you can do with the right materials. Wait till you see my special flower arranging 'case study' (or 'vase study' --- which works really well if you're an American and say the two words so they rhyme!) later on in the book.



Rule 4: Have fun. Let your imagination run wild. Use other things that come to hand to make the display a little more interesting. Make it a hoot and your mates will soon hear and they'll be round with a few beers to try it for themselves.

Having fun is vital. Try doing the arrangement outdoors if you can. It's much more relaxed and fewer things can get broken. (The same is true of team building --- put the emphasis on fun and do it outdoors: it soon gets everyone into the spirit.)

There are also more things lying around outdoors --- I really think it's good to encourage the use of what I call *objets trouvés* in the arrangement.

Also, you can try dressing up and even take some snaps while you're doing the arrangement. It all adds to the fun and --- if things go well --- they'll make a wonderful keepsake and may encourage others to join in. Just remember:

Flower arranging can be fun!



Rule 5:

There is no rule 5! That's right, it's that simple. We want just a limited number of big flowers, a big container, some *objets trouvés* and then make it lots of fun.

As I hinted earlier, I went out this week to see what flowers and other materials were available and I took a few pictures to show you what I mean. (Truth be told, I think I know how Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall must feel when he's researching a new book or programme.)

So coming up is my photo diary to give you some ideas. It's not quite as juicy as Dear Deidre in *The Sun*, but it's nicer. Did you see the one that started: **Sex with brother was a mistake?** Surely that's obvious, isn't it? And not just with *my* brother.

Anyway, here goes with the photo diary/case study/vase study: I started in the garden so as to keep things legal (especially as it was going to be immortalised here!).



Lo and behold, the first thing I saw was the *Gunnera*. It's a fabulous plant --- everyone calls it giant rhubarb because it's just like... giant rhubarb.

In the picture you can easily see the huge leaves, which I sometimes stand under when it's raining. But you can also make out the flowers. There are male and female flowers (many plants are like that, but they're not all as easy to tell apart as is the case with *Gunnera*).

I got to work immediately. First I fetched out a rubber bucket --- a pink one because that seemed to go with the rhubarb colour of the flowers --- then I got a saw and cut off one of the female flowers. Each is about the size of a football and quite heavy. They'd easily crush a baby animal or bird to death. Easily.



You can see the female flower in the picture after I'd cut it, waiting on the table. If you look carefully in the picture you'll see I was working outside. Like I said, it's easier and you can make more of a mess and have some fun.

Come to think of it, the flower's not dissimilar to an oversize, overweight coconut. But, of course, it's soft and flowery. Which makes it quite hard to just cut it off with a saw. It's actually a bit like being a plant butcher and it gave me an idea of what it must be like to be a real butcher in a shop. It feels a bit cruel but we can't always get others to do our dirty work for us.



The next thing was to pick a couple of male flowers. You can easily tell them because they just look more 'male' if you know what I mean! (Isn't it ironic that in our phallos-centric society where we're trying to even things up for ladies, nature so often trips us up by putting phalluses in unexpected places.)

Anyway, here's the first male flower, leaning against the table. They're really quite heavy and this one is about 4 foot long (over a metre!) so you can see we're not talking about dainty. Though I think they're lovely flowers and quite pretty. Luckily they don't smell at all, because if they did they would

probably give off so much pollen that a hay fever sufferer would keel over and start vomiting with migraine. Luckily I'm immune, although the whole thing I mentioned with not being able to look in people's mouths is difficult!

So now this is the point where it would be so easy to start trimming the flowers and looking at foliage and laying things out to see how they fit together and wondering about proportion and the direction from which people are going to be viewing the arrangement.

Careful! This is a dangerous time and one where lots of guys get turned off. It's the equivalent of the cup of coffee moment for someone who's just quit smoking.

For me, the best thing to do is to get your first couple of flowers into the vase (I still call it a vase not a bucket or pail, by the way, because later on we're going to be working with more conventional materials and it's good to use the right descriptors now so as not to have to face the unsettling effects of changing vocabulary at the same time as changing materials).

Here on the right you'll see that I've first of all popped a couple of male flowers straight into the vase.

Once that's done, it's pretty much plain sailing. Below, notice how the female flower has to go in front, so you can see it. We don't want to hide the lady under a bushel!



You'll see from the pic that it looks as if I've been trimming the female. In fact those are a couple of the feathery pink petals that came adrift as I was pushing it into the vase. You can tell from the bulge in the vase that it's quite a tight fit --- and there's more to come, in the form of the third male!



And there she is --- the hard work's done and the rest is fine-tuning. (Here, I think the choice of pink vase proves to have been inspired.) But remember I mentioned *objets trouvés*? Now's the time to have a look round. In my garden I happened to find an old hub cap, drain rods and a beautiful A (which is my initial but would have worked just as well for an Anthony or Adrian).

See what you think of the different possibilities they afforded. First with the hubcap and rods (and doesn't it make a difference photographing away from the house? --- but this isn't a camera workshop!) and second with the A.



And that's just about all there is to it, except to remind you to include the guy himself in the picture (hard for me because I was taking my own pics, but I got my friend to take this one for me though she missed my face, which was a shame).

All I can say is that it was great fun to do and I'd thoroughly recommend it to anyone. And was I proud? Hell yeah!

So go on guys, give it a go!



Thanks for reading everyone and good luck with your flower arranging.

(Oh, and I know some of you will ask --- about that little apron I'm wearing. It's called a mini-pinny and you can get them from Polly via me. They're £15 including p&p and they have four fantastic little pockets where you can keep your phone, keys, little tools, cigs if you smoke, tissues, notelets and so on. They're 100% recommended!)

Addendum:

Up until recently I realise that I would have had to explain to anyone living in North America that *The Sun* is a newspaper (in the same extended sense that Fox News is a news programme), that Oxfordshire is in England, that a garden is a back yard with flowers in and that a hedgerow is an entirely alien construct. But now you've had the fabulous Mr O'B, you know that you're the foreigners, so I don't have to explain.

World 2.0. Yay!

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If you're a guy who wants to get in touch with his sensitive side but you don't want to risk a sweat lodge or anything, it's not easy to know where to start. But help is at hand!

In this delightful and genuinely handy guide, Andrew Carey starts you on your journey towards 'mastering' the art of flower arranging. Pushing the dinghy out gently at first, he shows you, step by step, how to choose the right flowers and vase, where to work, how to find what he calls *objets trouvés* and how to avoid all the common pitfalls.

And if you're a lady, you may know (or love) a guy who could benefit. Come on, here's your chance to help him get in touch with his inner lady!

The book's also beautifully illustrated, rather like one of those recipe books with loads of pictures for people who get tired of all the words.

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