Freshly-cut flowers arranged in straw baskets or ceramic vases make lovely combinations that are hard to beat. Unfortunately, the blossoms soon wilt, fade, and die before you're ready to let them go.

This summer dry them in a microwave oven for lasting enjoyment. Sprinkled generously with silica gel, they retain their natural beauty. It's difficult to tell at a glance whether they're dried or fresh.

Now's the time to pick the most beautiful flowers for drying. They must be picked at their peak for best appearance after drying—and summer is the peak for most flowers. Before noon is the preferable time of day for picking.

Using a microwave oven allows you to dry flowers and keep their natural shape. Conventional methods can take weeks. But with a microwave the heating time is usually between 2 and 5 minutes and the cooling time rarely longer than 20. Oven drying preserves memories as well as flowers. You can save wedding or anniversary arrangements, special corsages, and birthday party posies.

**HOW TO**

**Things you will need:** Fresh flowers, silica gel, florist's wire, green floral tape, thick white glue.

**Tools and equipment:** Microwave oven, small soft paintbrush, scissors, flat glass baking pan, coffee cup.

**Note:** Use any glass, paper or oven-proof dish.

**Caution:** Never use metal in a microwave oven.
1. Choose flowers bright in color, very fresh, half-open, firm, and with thick petals.

*Note:* Red flowers tend to turn a deep wine color after drying.

2. Cut flowers, leaving 1/2-inch stem. (Leaves should be dried separately and then added to the stems of the flowers.)

3. To use silica gel:
   - Pour the grains into a baking pan and place flowers over them.
   - Spread silica gel evenly between the petals, filling every space.
   - Cover flowers completely with grains. Petals should not be exposed to the air.

4. Bake flowers in oven as follows:
   - Put a coffee cup filled with water in the corner of the oven.
   - Place flowers in the oven and heat for 2 to 3 minutes. Time may vary with different flowers.
   - After heating, remove flowers and let them cool for 15 to 20 minutes. If stem and base area still has moisture trapped in it, bury base and stem area only in silica gel and place in oven for about 1 minute longer.
   - Use brush to remove all silica gel grains.
   *Note:* It's best not to use flowers that are fuzzy, because the silica gel sticks to the petals and makes it difficult to remove the grains.

5. When the flowers are dry, use florist's wire for the stems. Use floral tape to wrap entire length of wire. Spread glue over the loop and place flowers into position. Cut wire the length desired for flower arrangements.

*Note:* Pine cones may also be dried using this procedure. In this case, silica gel is not necessary. Just put the pine cones in the oven for 2 minutes. After they have cooled, paint them or use them in making wreaths.