

INFORMATION SHEET: PROVIDING FLOWERS AND GREENS FOR THE ALTAR

"For hundreds of years flowers have decked churches for festivals, but apparently not altars if pictures and records of early times are accurate. Not until the late nineteenth century did flowers become generally acceptable decorations 'on or above the Table' in either the Church of England or the Episcopal Church."¹ The only rubric in the Prayer Book that mentions flowers is found in the Dedication and Consecration of a Church. Today, flowers at the altar are normal, and we even expect to see them elsewhere in the church on special occasions. In fact, we've become so accustomed to seeing them that their absence, except during Advent and Lent when greens are used, is likely to be noted. The following information is provided to encourage those who hesitate because they aren't "expert" arrangers or aren't sure of what is acceptable and what is not, as well as for those who provide flowers and greens for the altar on a regular basis and may benefit from a "refresher" course.

"Altar flowers (*and greens*) are a gift of life and love presented to God, not to the congregation; **anyone, expert or not, can make an acceptable offering** (*emphasis added*). The only standard for church arrangements is that flowers (*and greens*) at the altar or in any other area blend into the background of the worship center and increase its beauty."²

The customary practice for flowers and greens at St. Stephen's:

1. Individuals provide the altar arrangements, rather than the Altar Guild or a designated flower committee.
2. Any natural materials can be used – flowers (from the garden, greenhouse, field, or woods – even the blossoms of what people consider to be weeds), leaves, branches, greens, grasses, nuts, berries, vegetables, fruits, pods and tassels. Dried flowers, potted plants (e.g., memorial lilies, poinsettias and sheaves of wheat) and trees are appropriate if they fit the occasion.
3. Artificial flowers and greens aren't used for altar arrangements or elsewhere in the church at St. Stephen's. "...they represent life only symbolically. They aren't life; they aren't God's gift returned to him."³
4. Arrangements shouldn't be taller than the altar cross. There is a visual tool in the kitchen to help determine the appropriate height – a

yellow dot with a black ink line in its center has been placed to the left of the windows over the sink. The black line represents the top of the cross.

5. If a florist is used, provide some basic instructions for arrangements in the brass vases: the height of the arrangements themselves should not exceed 10-11 inches; the necks of the vases are very narrow – approximately 7 inches in circumference. Try to have little or no oasis showing above the vase tops. In general, the vases do not leave the church. However, if taking the vases to a florist is absolutely necessary, inform the Vicar and the Altar Guild Team when and for how long they will be gone.

6. Be sure to wipe the brass vases with a soft cloth or paper towel to remove any water droplets before placing the arrangements on the Altar and after removing them. They are placed between the Eucharist candles and the cross when the service includes holy communion; to the outside of the candelabra when the service doesn't include holy communion and the candelabra are used.

7. The brass vases traditionally have been used to hold the altar arrangements, but other kinds of containers could be used. They should hold and display the arrangements well, fit the space available on the re-table (the shelf attached to the east wall behind the altar, holding the cross, candles and vases), be clean and able to hold water or prepared oasis. For example, low rectangular containers would be appropriate if horizontal rather than vertical arrangements are desired. Good sources for containers would be floral supply houses, the floral sections of stores like Michael's, or your florist. Careful thought should be given to whether or not containers, other than the brass vases, should be visible. Consult the Vicar if there is any question about the appropriateness of the containers. The height limitation noted in #4 above applies here, as well.

8. Altar arrangements are always given to the Glory of God and may be given in memory or honor of or in thanksgiving for someone or some event. Let the Vicar know if you wish to have a memorial or thanksgiving noted in the service bulletin.

¹ *Barbara Gent and Betty Sturges, The Altar Guild Book, Morehouse Publishing, 1982*

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*