

# fresh focus

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## Looking for a hardy garden flower, redolent of summer? Yarrow is here!



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YARROW IS BOTH A florist's staple—with good reason!—and a storied herb, rich in lore to share with customers. There are two main types: yellow yarrow and "cottage" yarrow, which comes in a range of subtle, generally muted colors. Both are typically available from late spring through late fall, with the peak season at mid-summer. Both are long-lived and offer a pungent fragrance that varies in intensity with growing conditions and variety, but that is most pronounced when the leaves are still present on the stem.

The first image that comes to mind when you think "yarrow" is probably the yellow yarrow, *Achillea filipendulina*. "It's one of the more hardy cut flowers we have," says Jay Fisher of Fisher Farms in Lompoc, California. Jay is talking in particular about the old standby known as 'Parker's Variety'. "If you do nothing to it, it'll dry on the stem," which is hard and strong. (Yarrow can also be purchased as a dried material. If you dry it yourself, it's recommended to hang it upside-down in an area with low light and low humidity.)

Yellow yarrow also comes in other varieties, including the well-known 'Coronation Gold', a cross between *A. filipendulina* and *A. clypeolata*. Fisher Farms grows Parker's and a third yellow variety, also a hybrid, called 'Moonshine'. "It has a hard yellow head like Parker's, but it's a lighter, brighter yellow, and the stems are shorter," says Jay: while Parker's yarrow can grow five feet tall, with heads four to five inches across, 'Moonshine' is generally under three feet tall, with heads two to three inches across. 'Moonshine', however, may be preferred for its sunny color and overall performance as a cut flower. Blooming earlier than Parker's, it will even bloom year-round in a frost-free year or climate.

All types of yarrow are perennials: cut them



"Yarrow" can mean cottage yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*, top photo, left), fluffy white *A. ptarmica* (near left), or the familiar, hardy yellow *A. filipendulina* (far left).

back and they will grow again, stronger than before. Jay, however, often starts over with yellow and orange yarrow, planting from seed in the spring, so that blooming will be delayed until the fall, when there is high demand for these colors.

*A. filipendulina* is also called “fern-leaf” yarrow, a term that well describes the feathery leaves—but as a florist, you may never have seen them, since the foliage is typically stripped from cut yarrow before it leaves the farm. Yarrow is also, however, a popular garden plant, often planted in the same varieties that are cultivated for the cut-flower market.

## Cottage bouquets

“Cottage yarrow,” *A. millefolium*, has even more abundant feathery foliage, as the species name suggests (“millefolium” means “a thousand leaves”). In the case of cottage yarrow, the flat-topped flower heads look even more like clusters of many individual, daisy-like flowers, with easily distinguished center disks and ray petals. This gives the inflorescence a “softer” look. Cottage yarrow is hardy, but not quite as hardy as yellow yarrow. The stems are also shorter, typically two or 2½ feet tall.

Cottage yarrow comes in a spectrum of soft hues from cream, salmon, or lilac to bicolors such as deep red flowers with orange centers. If you see yarrow in true white, it is either *A. millefolium* or *A. ptarmica*—another species with a soft, garden look, where each flower head (or “corymb”) looks like a tiny bouquet.

From a botanist’s point of view, of course, it is just that. Indeed, each aster-like “flower” in the corymb itself comprises many flowers: the ray petals and central disk florets are all, technically, individual flowers. Yarrow belongs to the vast, well-developed Compositae family of flowering plants, so named because each flower head is actually a “composite” of many flowers. Other members of the family include sunflowers, mums, and zinnias.

## Of love and the devil

Few cut flowers used in floristry have as rich a history in folklore and herbal medicine. Here are just a few of the tidbits you can share with customers about yarrow:

Yarrow as a cut flower				
	<i>Achillea filipendulina</i>	<i>Achillea</i> ‘Coronation Gold’*	<i>Achillea ptarmica</i>	<i>Achillea millefolium</i> (cottage yarrow)
Blossom color	Yellow	Yellow	White	Cream, pink, peach, rust, rose, bicolors
Blossom size	4 inches	3-4 inches	2-3 inches	2-3 inches
Leaf color	Green	Gray-green	Green	Green
Stem length	30-40 inches (unbranched)	20-30 inches (unbranched)	18-24 inches (branched)	18-24 inches (multi-branched)
Bunch size	10 stems	10 stems	10 stems or grower bundles	Grower bundles
Vase life	14-21 days	14-21 days	10-14 days	10-14 days

\*hybrid between *A. filipendulina* and *A. clypeolata*

- Yarrow has long been used to heal cuts and wounds, as reflected in such common names for the herb as staunchweed and soldier’s woundwort. The genus name *Achillea* recalls the legend that the great Achilles, hero of the Greeks during the Trojan War, used yarrow to heal the battle wounds of soldiers who fought under his command.

- In the Middle Ages, yarrow was regarded as a magic herb, used on the one hand for protection against all manner of diseases and ill fortune, on the other to call the devil to one’s aid. For this reason it also goes by such common names as sanguinary, devil’s nettle, and bad man’s plaything.

- Yarrow has also been called “seven year’s love.” Some say that if you hang a bunch of dried yarrow (perhaps, yarrow saved from the wedding decorations) over the bed of a married couple, it will guarantee enduring love for at least seven years.

- The abundant leaves of yarrow were formerly cooked as a vegetable or dried and used as an herb. They have even been used to flavor beer. They have a pleasant, predominantly sweet but slightly bitter taste.

- Yarrow is often included in gardens in order to attract butterflies.

- Dried stalks of yarrow are the preferred medium for telling the future used by practitioners of the I Ching. In China, yarrow is traditionally regarded as a lucky herb, good for the eyes and the brain.

## Design-friendly

In design, yarrow’s flat flower heads are particularly suited for techniques like stacking,

terracing, and pavé. They also add texture and breadth to the top surface of any hand-tied bouquet. For wedding work, the large flower heads may be divided into smaller sections for use in corsages and other personal flower adornments. Experiment with yarrow, and you’ll discover just how versatile it is and how adaptable, with all the sunny charm of summer. 🌻

## Care tips yarrow

- Purchase yarrow that is fully developed and shows no indication of wilting. Avoid bunches with blackened leaves or stems with brown segments.
- Remove lower leaves and fresh-cut 1-2 inches from the stem ends. Place in a tepid floral food solution and condition at room temperature for several hours or overnight.
- Treating with a citric acid hydration solution has been shown to be beneficial, especially for cottage yarrow.
- Store in a 38-40 F degree cooler with 80% humidity. Do not crowd yarrow in the bucket, as it is highly susceptible to botrytis mold.