

CHURCH FLOWERS AND SUSTAINABILITY



Credit: Pershore Abbey – Trudy Burge

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Church flowers

WHY?

The Church is well known for its 'ministry of flowers' – a feast for the senses. We beautify our buildings with blooms and foliage for weekly worship, celebrate Easter with white lilies, and mark Christmas with holly and ivy. We express our grief with flowers at funerals and our joy at weddings, and other special services. Flower festivals are an established way of engaging with local communities and fundraising. And for many, being on the flower rota is a significant expression of their Christian faith and their gift to the church.

Church flowers are not simply for decoration – they are a beautiful way to worship our Creator through His creation and bring the beauty of that Creation into our churches. When we display flowers and foliage in our churches, we participate in a beautiful act of worship – and a celebration of God's creation in colour, form and scent. We also offer to God human expertise, creativity and time through flower arrangers' dedication to their craft which often lasts decades.

To celebrate Creation and the Creator appropriately, we must consider how we source our church flowers and the impact of our choices when deciding on the flowers to display in church. We encourage you to think about where your flowers come from, what conditions they have been grown in, and how you choose to display them. Consider how they can be brought into the church in a way that is in tune with the season and our local environment – to enjoy creation in a healthy and sustainable way and bring glory to our Creator.

This resource will explore how sourcing seasonal, local flowers displayed using natural materials (rather than floral foam) are good practices to follow, including examples of practical ways to do this, as well as explaining further the problems with some of the alternative ways of bringing flowers into church. The Sustainable Church Flowers (SCF) movement suggests the following principles: 'local, seasonal, biodegradable, and foam-free.'



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Watch this short video from the Diocese of Gloucester to get started. Former florist Julia organises the flower rota at Daglingworth Church, where the PCC has decided to use British seasonal flowers wherever they can. She summarises the 'why' and the 'how' in just 2 minutes: www.gloucester.anglican.org/2022/eco-church-in-an-hour-flower-power/

HOW?

'How' will explore where we source our flowers and how we can display them.

LOCALLY GROWN, SEASONAL FLOWERS

One of the first places we can start is by thinking of locally grown, seasonal flowers. Think about what may already be growing in our churchyards, gardens and allotments, or consider what we can plant to use in our flower arrangements in the future.

Thinking locally and seasonally is in contrast to importing flowers shipped across the world out of season. Many of the flowers we can pick up in supermarkets carry a weighty carbon footprint with them. Not only that of importing them – flying thousands of miles – but the water used to grow the flowers, and the chemical footprint of the pesticides they have been sprayed with. Likely exported flowers have been sprayed with chemicals multiple times over. Unlike food, there are no restrictions on how many times flowers can be sprayed with pesticides.

Beginning to think about where your flowers are grown (in the UK, if not more local to your church) and what is in season, is a much more sustainable approach with a significantly lower carbon footprint and overall harm to the environment.

Look to your congregation and local community for blooms, such as inviting people to contribute flowers from their gardens or allotments. This approach costs little and encourages community relationships.



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FLORAL FOAM

Floral foam is a lightweight, porous foam which provides both water and support to cut flower arrangements. The foam – which is not biodegradable – is often used to spell out names of the deceased at funerals or is cut into elaborate shapes for wedding celebrations, as well as used generally in weekly church flowers. It is a product of the petrochemical industry and made of plastic. Small particles of the foam can break off and find their way into our water systems, as well as the foam often being sold set in plastic containers.¹

Shane Connolly from SCF highlights the need for sustainability and the problem of floral foam whilst decorating a church windowsill with natural materials in this video here: vimeo.com/588302408

Shane notes that anyone who has used floral foam will have seen that the water will go green when a block of floral foam is soaked in water. Small parts of the foam can break off, and when that water is poured away, all the microplastics find their way into our water systems, impacting wildlife.

Floral foam also doesn't compost, meaning it cannot return to the soil even if it's placed in compost heaps. We may believe floral foam is environmentally friendly through its green colouring, but Shane highlights it could take around 500 years for the foam to break down in a compost heap.

The Royal Horticultural Society have recently banned floral foam, which Shane describes as a groundbreaking and necessary move. His takeaway is to stop using floral foam completely and use alternatives instead.

¹ Taken from: Church asked to ban 'damaging' floral foam in funeral flowers written by Gabriella Swerling for The Telegraph, 9th February 2022



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The world before floral foam

The London Flower School has explored the history of floral foam, including flower arranging methods from before the introduction of floral foam. Floral foam has existed since the 1950s, so noting that it has only been in widespread use for the last sixty or so years is a great encouragement that alternative methods are possible!

londonflowerschool.com/journal/the-world-before-floral-foam

Alternatives to floral foam

Some other options include pebbles, sand, moss, twigs, chicken wire, glass marbles or a glass or metal 'frog': flowermag.com/guide-to-floral-foam-alternatives/

Flowers from the Farm, a forum for British flower growers, offer some tips on foam-free flower arrangements, including how to use some of the alternatives mentioned above: www.flowersfromthefarm.co.uk/foam-free-floristry/

SCF have also put together some resources on alternative techniques: suschurchflowers.com/techniques

as well as demonstrations: suschurchflowers.com/videos

Another alternative could be using pot plants to bring greenery into your church building. These will last a long time if cared for properly. If so, ensure they are UK-sourced and in peat-free compost and that they are watered appropriately for the type of plant. You could also choose pot plants that may serve a further purpose, such as being given to congregation members, community groups, or schools as gifts which will then be planted. Consider how you could gift pollinating plants or those that produce herbs or vegetables – a collective win for biodiversity, food miles, and access to locally grown food!



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You might also consider using artificial flowers. In terms of re-usability, they can be brought out and used again and again if cared for well. You can also purchase second-hand artificial flowers in charity shops or online or collect any that your congregation or local people are no longer using. If you're buying new artificial flowers, then there will be some impact from their production, transportation, and packaging – but you can then re-use them for a long time.



A door swag made with a potato, taken by Sue Cole, former Property Officer for the United Reformed Church National Synod of Wales

DISPOSING OF FLORAL FOAM AND FLOWER WRAPPINGS YOU ALREADY HAVE

If you already have floral foam or other products to use up, it is less wasteful to use what you already have and then consider the sustainability of your future purchases.

Disposing of floral foam

The Sustainable Floristry Network suggests the following points for disposing of floral foam. You can read in more detail here: www.sustainablefloristry.org/blog-index/aboutfloralfoam



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Some quick tips

- All foam products should be sent to landfill-bound rubbish only
- Floral foam should not be placed in the compost, garden, or natural environment.
- Water containing foam fragments should not be poured down the sink. The best practice for disposing of water containing floral foam fragments is to pour it through a tight weave fabric such as an old pillowcase to capture as many of the foam fragments as possible. At this point in our understanding of microplastic and its impact on the natural world, best environmental practice would see this strained water poured into a hole in the ground or a garden to limit movement through the environment, but never the water system. However, it is important to remember that those plastic fragments will remain in that hole for an indefinite period of time.

Disposing of plastic wrapping

Some plastic wrapping from flowers may be described as a 'soft plastic', which is any type of plastic that you can scrunch in your hand. Supermarkets collect many of these kinds of plastic, so check with your local supermarket for the list of items they recycle.

See this article following the removal of the flowers left in honour of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Castle: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-62967203?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA

Encourage those buying flowers at florists to ask for them to be wrapped in brown paper instead of plastic wrap or take your own item to reuse to transport the flowers in. Many florists may already favour brown paper over plastic wrap – so consider where you are shopping too.



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Talking to your leadership

See this great resource from SCF for liaising with your PCC. They say: 'This Parochial Church Council resolution is an example of one that can be used to ensure that the principles of Sustainable Church Flowers are formally adopted and endorsed by the whole church community.'

This one can be used as it stands or as a template that can be adapted to a local situation:
suschurchflowers.com/a-pcc-motion

Supporting those who use your building to make sustainable choices

There are many reasons why guests and visitors may bring their own flowers onto the premises. We encourage churches to use their influence to guide – such as encouraging those planning weddings or funerals to consider the impact of their flower arrangements. You might think about creating a 'sustainable flowers policy' to help guide and support your guests. This lets them know about your preference for certain kinds of flowers as an Eco Church, and could be a way to provide them with ideas – supportive local florists or other local knowledge, for instance.

See this example of a church events flower policy from SCF here: suschurchflowers.com/onewebmedia/Church%20Event%20Flowers%20SCF.pdf

In your churchyard, people may bring flowers in plastic wrap and/or create floral arrangements using floral foam to lay on gravestones. We encourage you to find a place for people to dispose of plastic wrap and floral foam. Could you put in a few compartmentalised bins to collect the foam to be sent to landfill, plastic wrap to be recycled with other plastics at supermarkets, and any cardboard or paper to go in curbside recycling?

CASE STUDIES

See our case studies for some of the ways churches have been considering church flowers and sustainability, as well as further examples of church policies for flowers.



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LONGER READS

The vision of SCF is to bring creation into the church, reducing pollution in our floral decorations by using carbon-neutral flowers and less plastic in order to glorify God sustainably. There is a wide variety of resources available on the SCF website so do explore: suschurchflowers.com/

Sustainable Church Flowers (In Conversation with Shane Connolly) from the Diocese of Worcester. This 30-minute interview goes deeper into how and why sustainable church flowers matter and some of the alternatives we can pursue: vimeo.com/582556514

Become a Sustainable Church Flowers ambassador to advocate and have an impact in your local community: suschurchflowers.com/ambassadors

An article from the Church Times on 'Not mourning Oasis glory: the environmental impact of church flowers' www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/5-august/features/features/not-mourning-oasis-glory-the-environmental-impact-of-church-flowers

More information about floral foam, its origins, and uses, from the Sustainable Floristry Network: www.sustainablefloristry.org/blog-index/aboutfloralfoam

Floral foam adds to the microplastic pollution problem: www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/12/191210111651.htm

With special thanks to the Sustainable Flower movement for the resources they provide, and to Sue Cole, former Property Officer for the United Reformed Church National Synod of Wales, whose content has influenced much of this resource, as well as all the churches who contributed to our case studies.