



Chicken Wire Mechanics for a Wicker Basket Arrangement *for the* Professional Florist



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Professional floral designers have a wide assortment of floral design mechanics available to them through floral supply companies and florist wholesalers. Florists should embrace new and tried-and-true mechanics and make them part of their design repertoire. Practicing with a variety of mechanics will pay off in the event you can't find your favorite items.

Mechanics

There is newfound interest in alternatives to fresh flower foams. Some designers are using chicken wire, also called poultry netting, as a substitute for floral foam. Before we address floral foam and chicken wire use, it is important to understand the definition of the term “mechanics.” The American Institute of Floral Designers (AIFD) defines mechanics as

a collective term for devices or techniques that help to secure materials and create stability in a floral composition. Mechanics are ordinarily concealed but may be deliberately exposed for artistic effect. Sound mechanics are the foundation for good design work.

Fresh Flower Foam

Phenolic floral foams are made from petroleum. They contain compounds that leach from the foam into the water-holding solution in which they are soaked. One of these compounds is a trace amount of formaldehyde.

Floral foams are safe to use, but some shops have soaking bins that are not regularly emptied and sanitized. If the soaking bin is not drained and cleaned after use, the compounds can concentrate in the water. Another problem with this practice is that microbes can grow in the soaking-

bin water. Microbes lead to stem blockages that shorten vase life—the time flowers remain beautiful and usable.

The best practice for hydrating fresh flower foam is to soak only the amount needed for the day. At the end of the day, dispose of the water and sanitize the bin with a quaternary ammonium (quat) disinfectant. Such cleaning solutions are available from floral supply companies. If these are not available, household detergent is the next best thing.

Chicken Wire

This mechanic preceded floral foam in floral design history. It is added in layers or stuffed into a container. It is important to fold it so that stems penetrate at least two layers of the wire, with an approximate separation of 1 inch between levels. Multiple layers of the wire control stem placements.

Some florists use a layer of chicken wire on top of fresh flower foam, especially in large-scale arrangements. The added rigidity of the wire layer keeps large stems—such as flowering branches, gladiolus, and protea—in place.

Chicken wire used in floral design is typically 24-gauge wire painted dark green. This makes it easy to conceal and slows rusting.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using chicken wire mechanics.

Advantages

- Chicken wire is inexpensive, depending on the source and quantity purchased. If purchased in bulk, it costs only about 50 cents per foot. Some sources oriented toward the craft market may charge much more for smaller quantities.
- Chicken wire is reusable. While customers don't typically return their containers and mechanics, florists regularly collect their containers (and associated mechanics) after weddings and events.
- It is malleable and can be formed into multiple shapes and sizes.

Disadvantages

- Poultry netting is made of metal wire, so it rusts and disintegrates.
- Rust can leave stains that are difficult to remove from glass, crystal, and porcelain.
- The wire is sharp and can cut, scrape, and puncture your skin.
- The chicken wire is in water, so spills are more common than when working with floral foam.

Wicker Basket Arrangement

We chose a wicker basket to make this floral design. Because this design is in a shallow container of water, it is not easy to transport, so consider making it in place rather than delivering it to the site.

Materials

- Chicken wire rectangle, about 6 by 12 inches
- Durable plastic liner
- Poly foil
- Paper-covered wire
- Wicker basket, about 14 inches diameter
- Floral paint
- Double-faced satin ribbon
- Multipurpose shears, florist knife
- *Matthiola incana* (stock), small, 4 bunches
- Ivy stems, about 6



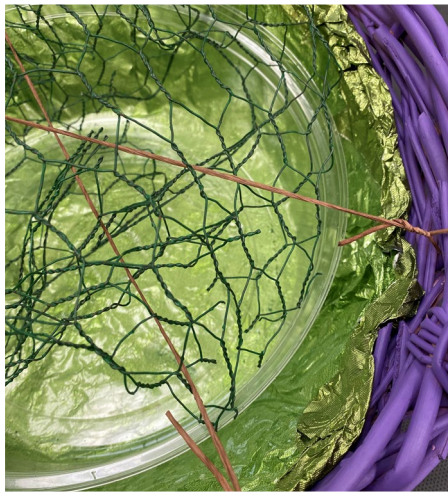
Gather the materials for the design. Paint the wicker basket with multiple light coats of floral paint, allowing it to dry between layers. While the paint is drying, you can prepare the mechanics.



First, cut a 22-inch length of chicken wire and form it into a dome within the durable plastic liner. Be sure to tuck sharp wires underneath the dome so they do not protrude. There should be at least two layers of wire within the shape. The dome should take up most of the space in the liner to help make the unit secure. The top of the dome should slightly protrude above the height of the basket.



To help prevent water escaping the liner, we created a secondary liner with two layers of poly foil. Form the layers into the basket and cut away the excess. Turn the edges of the trimmed foil to create a neat rim.



Bind the mechanic unit into the basket using paper-covered wire. Thread some of the paper-covered wire through the chicken wire dome to help stabilize it within the liner. You can also use chenille stems (craft pipe cleaners) or string for this purpose.



Once finished, the chicken wire dome is stable, and the multiple plastic layers will hold water. Of course, the plastics used are not environmentally friendly like the chicken wire, but the rigid plastic liner in this example was recycled from the packaging of a bakery layer cake.



We filled our completed basket with assorted colors of *Matthiola incana* (stock), both single- and double-flowered, radially arranged into a hemispherical shape, and added a neat bow on the basket's handle. You might consider winding long stems of *Hedera helix* (needlepoint ivy) varieties around the basket's handle. Be sure to remove any foliage that would fall below the waterline, and insert the stems so that they touch the bottom of the container.

For related information, see these MSU Extension publications at extension.msstate.edu:

Chicken wire mechanics for a large vase arrangement for the professional florist (P3732)

Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*) *for the farmer florist* (P3301)

Stock (*Matthiola incana*) *for the farmer florist* (P3252)

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This publication is dedicated to the memory of Mr. Lew Kull, a retail florist in Canton, Ohio. Mr. Kull received professional floristry training through the GI Bill. He purchased a floral shop in 1951 and named it Lew Kull Florists. He recruited the author of this publication, Jim DelPrince, as a store manager and designer in 1983 and taught him the benefits and detriments of chicken wire floral design mechanics, in addition to thousands of other techniques.

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