HOW TO: THE BASICS

Timing
If you're like I am on the day I throw a party, you'll have scant time for creating many garnishes at the last minute. No problem. Almost all garnishes and sculptures can be made up two days ahead. Designs based on sliced pears are the only exception. Pears turn brown within a few hours of being cut. You can retard this a bit by passing your cut pear sections through a bath of undiluted, bottled lemon juice for a few seconds though it will only slow down the browning, not prevent it. The same lemon bath treatment works well on apples. Wedge cuts should be reassembled to minimize their surface area. All garnishes should be wrapped airtight in plastic wrap or bags and refrigerated until needed. Air and heat are the two forces that wilt and dry your garnishes. Wrapped and refrigerated, your creations stay crisp and bright for days. Thus, you needn't wait until the last moment to make them.

Temperature
Low temperatures tend to increase the water pressure in fresh foods, and this pressure tends to make the food split when cut. Happily, most fresh foods can be stored for a half day at room temperature and not suffer. Items you should refrigerate right up to the moment you cut them are: green onions and leeks.
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Soaking & Salting
Vegetable flowers call for a period of soaking in cold water. During this phase the vegetables will absorb some water, swell and expand so as to complete their shaping. It isn't necessary to ice the water, but it should be pre-chilled in your refrigerator. You may also wish to firm up a carrot butterfly with a five minute cold water soak. The times for soaking vary, ranging from five minutes to two days. The specific times are given in the instructions for each garnish on the following pages. Salting food will drain water out of it, rendering the food considerably softer than it is naturally. The carrot fishing net requires soaking the carrot in an extremely salty water bath. Sometimes, a radish fan or other garnish may not want to lay out properly. Then a direct dose of table salt for two or three minutes on the specific area you wish to soften will make the food surprisingly pliable. Be sure to rinse the salt off as soon as the food is soft enough for your needs.

Display Life
All of the designs in this book will last on your buffets for at least four hours. Because the vegetable flowers have so much surface area in relation to their mass, they will begin to wilt a bit during this time but can be kept fresh by water misting via a standard houseplant atomizer. If you want to use them over again, put them back into a cold water bath for a half hour before wrapping and refrigerating. Most of the designs presented on these pages can be used more than once. In general, the larger and more massive an item is, the longer it will stay fresh and reusable.
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Picks and Skewers
Avoid dyed wooden picks. They are not colorfast. Also avoid wooden picks whose shafts are round. Some brands are called round but their shafts have four flat sides and it is the flat-sided style of pick you want to use. It is stronger and much easier to control for they won't roll around on your cutting board.

Wooden (usually bamboo) skewers come in lengths up to 12 inches. The short ones are thin but are still stronger than wooden picks. It's good to have some of these thin skewers on hand when you need a narrow but strong connector, as you do when attaching the heads to the melon swans. The 12-inch skewers are the masts on the sailboats and the tall stems for the vegetable flower arrangements.

Transporting
If you need to drive to a party with your creations, pack them into boxes in which you have placed a little toweling to soften their ride. Keep them wrapped until you arrive. Complete the final assembly of the more fragile designs at the party site. For instance, the wings on the birds should be extended and their heads attached at the party, the fruit skewers should also wait to be added to the watermelon peacock, the arms on the turnip snowman, the wings of the cabbage angel, the sails for the sailboats and the flowers to their stems. In short, if you suspect the rigors of the ride would shake your design apart, you are quite probably correct, and it would prudent to depart a few minutes early and complete your final assembly there.
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Summary for Successful Food Sculpturing
1. Work comfortably. Stand on a foot pad, or sit, but work with your back straight. Illuminate your cutting area with a bright light.
2. USE VERY SHARP KNIVES.
3. When slicing, use an exaggerated sawing motion and do not dip or rock your blade. For small, shallow cutting actions, hold your paring knife like a pencil or hold it like a paint brush with the handle in the palm of your hand.
4. DO NOT PUSH OR FORCE YOUR KNIVES.
5. Use two, parallel wooden picks to attach one piece of food to another. Use wooden picks with flat sides.
6. Make your garnishes a day or two ahead; wrap them airtight and store them in the refrigerator. Lemon juice will prevent raw, cut food from browning.
7. Work with fruit and vegetables that have been brought up to room temperature. This prevents splitting or cracking the food. The few exceptions to this rule are noted in the specific design instructions.
8. A cold water bath will swell, expand, open or fix the positions of vegetable flowers. Salting food will soften it.
9. When displaying your garnishes, mist them with cold water to keep them fresh and bright.
10. If you are driving somewhere with your garnishes, wait until you arrive at your destination to complete the final assembly of fragile designs.
11. A little practice goes a long way. My first carrot net was so thick it looked like a carrot horseshoe. Sometimes it took me five tries to get good at a particular cut. There's one real consolation though: in food sculpture you really can eat your mistakes!