



Flowers on the President's Table State Dining Room Splendor

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Stepping into the State Dining Room of the White House minutes before the guests enter on the evening of a State Dinner is a magical experience. Thirteen tables are set with glistening crystal, presidential china, and beautiful centerpieces on elegant tablecloths. On either side of the portrait of President Abraham Lincoln, abundant fresh flowers spill from the slender vermeil vases on the mantel. A large floral arrangement in a historic gold container is reflected in the gilded mirror above the eagle pier table. The television light towers and cameras are in position, ready to illuminate the entire room. The air is charged with a sense of excitement as the butlers fill the stemware with wine and chilled water. There are low whispers among the staff reviewing the order of events. The ambience in the room softens when the candlelight rises and the lights are dimmed. The evening is about to unfold as everyone moves into place. The chief usher, dressed in his crisp black tuxedo, slides open the double pocket doors of the State Dining Room, and the honored guests enter the room to share a magnificent dinner with the president and first lady.

Floral arrangements placed in the State Dining Room on the mantel and tables prior to a dinner in April 1992 include peach peonies, peach tulips, and pink delphiniums.

All photographs in this article are White House photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted.

The State Dining Room is host to events every day, ranging from formal State Dinners, breakfasts, luncheons, private dinners, and receptions to coffees and afternoon teas. Depending on the occasion, each event has its own feel or theme that is designed into every aspect, from the type of food served to the flower arrangements. The many factors that influence the selection of flowers include the season of the year, the type of event, and the decorative elements of the State Dining Room, such as the subtle stone gray-colored walls and ceiling and the rich, warm tones in the carpet and draperies. Even the gilded chandelier and sconces with their red undertones influence the color ranges that work well in the room.

A mahogany table is centered in the room for the majority of breakfasts, receptions, coffees, teas, or any other event for which the guests are not seated at individual tables. Even this beautiful table with the rich auburn-colored wood influences the flower selections. The historic Monroe plateau with its lovely gilded bronze figures and mirrored base is usually the focal point on the White House table, as it has been for nearly two centuries. Centered on the mirrors of the plateau, three tall gilded bronze fruit baskets supported by female figures are the ideal containers for every style of floral display from very formal, precise arrangements of roses and orchids to loose-flowing casual styles of summer daisies and lilies with trails of ivy that cascade over the edges and flow gracefully down the sides.

The first lady's preferences, the guests who will

attend, the type of event, the seasons of the year, and the time of the day determine the style and colors of flower arrangements. In selecting flowers for a breakfast buffet for a children's organization, bright colorful shades of reds, oranges, and yellows arranged in a casual style are more appropriate than very formal arrangements of pastel shades and subtle textures. Casual style and bright colors are easily integrated into the color ranges used in the decorative appointments of the room. If the event is an evening black tie reception instead of a breakfast, more formal arrangements of flowers are preferred. Seasonal flowers such as roses, tulips, hydrangea, and often orchids of softer colors arranged in a reserved style are more appropriate.

The White House staff manages the president and first lady's calendar and schedules. Advanced planning varies: larger more formal events are often scheduled months in advance to give all parties ample time to plan; others may be set weeks or only days ahead of time. When an event appears on the schedule, the first lady's social secretary is notified. She then works closely with the usher's office, which is the operational center for the White House residence and the source of information for all the residence staff, to plan and coordinate the event.

An initial meeting is set up with the social secretary and the chief floral designer to determine specific requirements and to specify flowers for various locations. Several factors are taken into consideration during these preliminary discussions, always keeping in mind what the first lady may want.

Frequently, the first lady deals directly with the flower shop to discuss her preferences. She might explain the general "look" she would like for a function and sometimes indicates the specific flowers she prefers. These discussions with the first lady take place when planning any large events such as ladies' luncheons, special dinners, and, of course, formal events such as black-tie dinners or State Dinners.

A State Dinner is an official function given by the president and first lady for a head of state or government from another country. By tradition, each country may be honored with only one official State Dinner during an administration, so each aspect will be carefully orchestrated. The White House typically hosts several State Dinners a year. Costs for these are covered by the Department of State.

Once a State Dinner appears on the schedule, the State Department Office of Protocol provides information to the White House staff that is helpful in entertaining foreign guests, often in great detail. Food and flower restrictions might be specified, as in some countries certain flowers and colors are considered offensive in a centerpiece. For example, in Muslim and many Pacific Rim countries, the color white is reserved for funerals. In many of the Central and South American countries, the same is true of the color yellow. Sometimes it is the type of flower that must be avoided; in some countries and regions, lilies, mums, or carnations are used only for funerals. The State Department also provides information on the personal preferences or allergies of guests. All of this information is sent to the East Wing social office and then to the usher's office, which in turn gives it to all Residence staff department supervisors. A State Dinner requires extensive planning by everyone from the housekeepers to the chefs, and of course the floral designers.

Conversations about the "look" of the floral designs with the first lady and her staff begin in the earliest stages of planning a State Dinner. Occasionally, the first lady has a particular gown she would like to wear and the "look" for the evening will be designed to coordinate with her dress. Additional dialogue includes questions like: What did we use the last time the country visited? What containers are available based on the number of tables we plan to have? Do we have enough of the gilded silver candelabra or containers? Other considerations, such as the season or preferences of the visiting head of state, help determine the general mood and feel of the event. Should it be a light, summery look, with garden flowers, or a rich autumn feeling of fruits and rust-colored roses? Light-colored tablecloths or dark colored tablecloths? Many options for centerpieces, tablecloths, china, crystal, and candlesticks must be considered.

Once the overall look for a State Dinner has been thoroughly discussed and agreed upon, the local wholesale floral suppliers are contacted to be sure the desired flowers will be available for that particular date. A few weeks before the dinner, a sample order of the flowers arrives. It is checked for quality and color and then conditioned or prepared to be used and last as long as necessary in a vase. The flower shop designers make up several sample centerpiece options for the first lady and

Right: Nancy Clarke at work in the flower shop arranging ambrosia roses, 2000.

Sample arrangements are often prepared during the planning for an event. Below left: A sample arrangement made prior to a State Dinner for Singapore in October 1985 includes white orchids, cream fuchsia, and lemons. Below right: A sample made in 1990 includes white freesia, pink gerber daisies, lavender asters, and pink roses.



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Unique arrangements are made for each State Dinner and for other special events held in the State Dining Room. Clockwise from top left: An arrangement of branches of ivy, red tulips, and pink carnations; a centerpiece of white lilies and pink carnations; and arrangements of white amaryllis with white french tulips.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: arrangements of white gerber daisies and white lilies; cream, white, and peach roses; and assorted tulips.





Above: The State Dining Room prior to an event in July 1994. Opposite: Arrangements of orange floribunda roses, movie star roses, orange unique roses, and apache roses were created for a dinner for France in November 2007.

the social secretary to review. Once the samples are approved, time is scheduled to view sample setups with the first lady. For these sessions, three or four different tables are set in the State Dining Room, complete with china, tablecloths, glassware, and candles. These sample choices can range from glass vases filled with vibrantly colored anemones, to historical candelabra filled with cascading roses, to vermeil containers from the White House collection overflowing with fresh seasonal fruits and amaryllis blooms. These trial viewings create a preview of the event in the actual room where it will take place.

The first lady sometimes rearranges flowers within the centerpiece, removing flowers or asking to add specific colors to give it her personal touch. She may move the centerpiece from one brightly colored tablecloth to a softer, pastel one or change the china or stemware, or rearrange the candlesticks. When she is satisfied that we have achieved what she wishes to portray, the final selection is made of the flowers and plant material that

will be used throughout the rest of the White House.

The sample is refrigerated and kept as a reference for the dinner and also as a guide for ordering the actual flowers for the dinner. Local floral wholesalers are asked to place the final flower orders immediately so the best growers for those particular flowers can be found. Caterers are asked to provide the tablecloths if the White House does not already own the style that the first lady wants. Because of the scale and preparations required for a State Dinner, part-time service staff are also scheduled at this time.

The week before the State Dinner, the activity level increases throughout all departments of the White House as well as in the flower shop. The part-time workers begin reporting to help with the early preparations. Flower orders begin to arrive on different days, allowing each flower to be processed individually so it will reach its peak on the day of the dinner. Stems are cut and placed in fresh water; some flowers are refrigerated, while others may be left out to quickly open. The





Special arrangements are placed in rooms other than the State Dining Room that are open to guests during dinners and special events. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a seasonal arrangement of yellow snapdragons, gerber daisies, roses, and lilies on the East Room mantel in October 1987; an arrangement of pink lilies and pink larkspur in the Red Room in September 1991; and white peonies, calla lilies, and snapdragons in the Blue Room in 1988.

Floral arrangements often incorporate objects related to the event. Above: Needlepoint animals were used in arrangements made for a luncheon for governors' spouses in spring of 1992. They included white lilies, pink September asters, and pink nerines. Right: A ceramic figure was used in November 1989 with an arrangement of Queen Anne's lace, pink nerines, and pink floribunda roses.



White House butlers prepare tables set with the Reagan china service prior to an event held in April 1985. Dogwood adorns the Monroe plateau.

A U-shaped table set for a NATO Summit dinner in April 1999 in the East Room is decorated with white hydrangea, white dendrobiums, gardenias, green grapes, white roses, smilax, and maiden hair ferns.



containers are polished and liners are filled with floral foam, which is then covered with a thin layer of natural moss. Candles are prepared, and the tablecloths arrive. The members of the flower shop staff finalize the appropriate timing for the placement of the various flower arrangements and assign individual responsibilities on the day of the dinner.

The day before the State Dinner, floral designers arrange the conditioned flowers and then place the coordinating arrangements in each room of the White House. The National Park Service brings in elegant plants carefully maintained in its greenhouses to place in predetermined locations. All the rooms on the State Floor except the State Dining Room, which remains closed until the dinner, are filled with lush bouquets and plant material. By the following morning, the state rooms of the White House are ready. The formal reception of the guest of state takes place outside at about 10:00 a.m., after which the first lady serves tea in one of the state parlors.

For the State Dinner all of the carefully laid plans come to life. The entire staff of the White House as well as the flower shop designers busily prepare for the event. Exact replicas of the sample centerpiece are created for each table. The coordinating flowers for the mantel and pier table in the State Dining Room are fashioned and put in place. Television crews position lights in preparation for the broadcast of the president's and foreign head of state's toasts during the dinner. Silver and china are brought out from storage. The butlers polish the flatware and candlesticks, wipe down each plate, and clean each piece of glassware. The tablecloths are put in place for the housekeeping staff to carefully press. The butlers place the china and stemware on the tables. Then the flower shop staff positions the centerpieces and arranges the candlesticks or votive candles on each table. Once the butlers have completely set the tables, an inspection of each centerpiece follows and the stage is judged set and ready for the performance to come.

Meanwhile, the first lady's staff and often the first lady herself walk through to make last-minute adjustments before the afternoon press preview. The press preview is an opportunity for members of the media to photograph the State Dining Room and to interview members of the White House staff about what the evening's decor will be like. Following the press preview, the centerpieces are photographed for future reference.

Approximately an hour before the guests are scheduled to arrive, every detail has been attended to and every effort has been made by the staff to guarantee that the foreign dignitaries and other guests have a memorable evening. An ending has come to the months of planning and coordination involving so many people. The butlers now slip away to put on their tuxedo jackets and straighten their ties, while the housekeeping staff do a last check to make certain every piece of furniture is dusted and gleaming. The stemware and gold-banded china on the tables in the State Dining Room sparkles. Flower arrangements are checked again for the final time. The red carpet is in place, and the North Portico doors stand open as the bright spotlights shining against the White House cast reflections across the polished marble floors. The White House is truly never more magnificent than at this moment.