

fresh focus

Long live carnations! The flower that keeps reinventing itself.

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

Carnations have long been regarded as the workhorse in a flower shop—and with good reason. Hardy and affordable, carnations are also supremely versatile—they can be used for almost any occasion or design style. They may serve as a mass flower or filler flower, or may even be used to create strong dynamic lines with proper sequential stem placements.



Carnations are also remarkably diverse in color palette and in flower forms, especially when the entire genus (*Dianthus*) is considered. Along with standard and spray carnations, we have the Chinese carnation, with its smaller blooms and picotee or frilled edges. The traditional sweet William and garden pinks are old-fashioned favorites that have been updated with new colors and characteristics. All carnations have a good vase life potential of 10-21 days (depending upon the variety). As a bonus, they have a mild to strong, spicy fragrance reminiscent of cloves.

Some florists turn up their noses at carnations, considering them “common.” And indeed, carnations’ very virtues have led to their devaluation. When a flower is cheap and long-lasting, it sometimes doesn’t get the respect it deserves.

Ironically, the low status of carnations as a “commodity” crop may be contributing to its resurgence as a fashion flower. Most carnations sold in North America were grown in Colombia. But wherever they are grown, carnations are vulnerable to fusarium, a soil-borne fungus that causes premature wilting. In the past fusarium was treated with methyl bromide; today, the trend is toward more sustainable and environmentally friendly methods, including steam cleaning of the soil and natural compost. Typically the treatment precludes planting carnations two years in a row. And once they’re



out, in light of the low prices fetched by carnations, growers may consider alternatives.

The result goes in two directions: One, growers plant fewer carnations, causing the price to rise, which may well serve to enhance the perceived value of this price-sensitive flower. Two, growers decide to invest in carnations of higher quality and of greater interest, opting to replace standard red, pink, or white carnations with fashion hues like chartreuse or pale orange. Today, growers like Benchmark are offering mixed assortments of novelty colors.

While carnations fall in and out of favor in North America, they have retained their popularity in Europe and Japan, which means that breeders are continually coming up with striking new hybrids: for example, Minerva, a burgundy carnation with white on the ruffled edges of the petals, or Minerva’s reverse, Tico Tico, white edged with burgundy. The Moon series by Florigene has injected the carnation spectrum with vivid new hues.

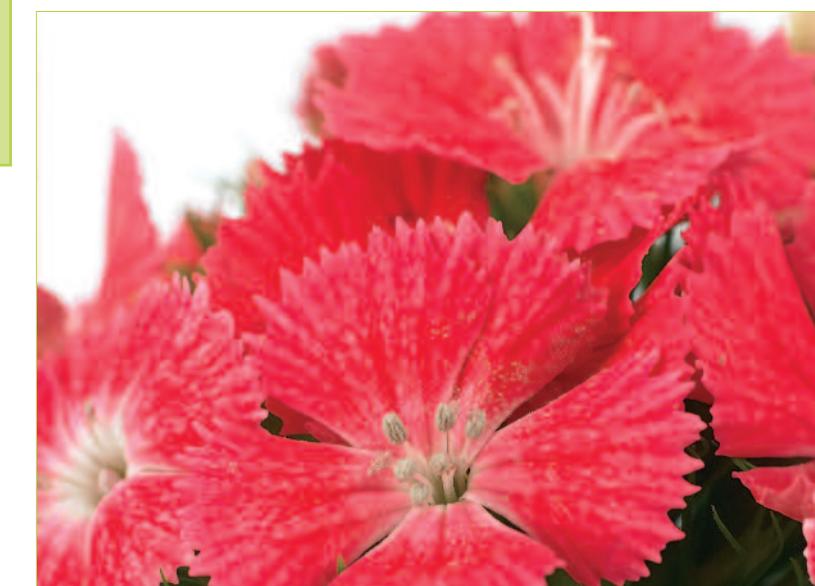
A carnation comeback? No—because carnations never really go away. Rather, like a perennially popular entertainer, they just change their style and hair color and re-enter the spotlight to roaring applause. 

Care tips

- All members of the carnation family (*Caryophyllaceae*) are sensitive to ethylene gas. Treat with an ethylene inhibitor, following manufacturer’s instructions.
- Select stems with flowers that are about 50% mature (open) and are free from brown or discolored petal edges.
- Remove the leaves from the lower one-half of the stems, then slant-cut one inch from the stem end and place in a floral food solution.
- If the flowers are shipped dry and appear to be dehydrated, treat with a citric acid hydration solution prior to placing into a floral food solution.
- Condition at room temperature for 1-2 hours or overnight to open blossoms. To hasten blossom opening, process as usual, then mist the flowers and cover with clear plastic to maintain high humidity. Place in bright, indirect light for maximum opening potential.
- Store at 36 degrees F and 85 percent humidity.



Sharing the runway with other new varieties coming out of Holland are Antigua (top right), a standard carnation with softly blended colors that has been described as “hydrangea-like,” and the Sweet F1 series of large-flowered sweet William (at right), available as cut flowers in four colors (red, coral, purple, and white).



Common Name	Botanical Name	Description	Bunch Size	Fragrance
Standard carnation	<i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i>	One flower, 2-3" in diameter	25	Mild, but varies by variety
Mini carnation	<i>Dianthus caryophyllus nana</i>	3-5 flowers, each 1-1.5" in diameter	10	Mild to medium
Sweet William	<i>Dianthus barbatus</i>	2-3" heads with multiple small flowers	10	Strong
Chinese carnation	<i>Dianthus spp</i>	One flower, 1-1.5" in diameter	10	Mild
Garden pinks	<i>Dianthus spp</i>	3-5 flowers, each 1-1.5" in diameter	10	Strong