

# fresh

focus



Hardy and diverse, anthuriums are on the rise.



**Anthurium:** *Anthurium andreanum*

**Availability:** year round, but specific varieties may be seasonal

**Bunch size:** typically sold individually

**Vase life:** 14 to 28 days

If you do mix anthuriums with other cut flowers, it's important to remember not to place them in a cooler where they will be exposed to temperatures less than 50 degrees Fahrenheit. On the other hand, you may freely use anthuriums together with other flowers in floral foam or in vase arrangements with flower-food solution—even though anthuriums on their own do not seem to require flower food to maintain their extraordinary vase life of up to five weeks.

## Calling a spathe a spathe

The reason for anthuriums' long life in the vase is simple: the colorful, heart-shaped "flower" of an anthurium is actually not a flower at all but a modified leaf structure called a spathe. The true flowers are borne along the spike-like protrusion called a spadix. The small, inconspicuous flowers begin blooming at the base of the spadix and progress upward as the flower matures. It's the spadix that gives anthuriums their name, from Greek *anthos* (flower) and *oura* (tail).

While anthuriums may be found in diverse habitats, most species occur in the tropical rainforests of Central and South America—Panama, Colombia and Ecuador. Here they grow under the shelter of the rainforest canopy. Thus, it's understandable that both cut and potted anthuriums like humidity but do not thrive in direct light. Most anthuriums grow as epiphytes (plants that derive their moisture and nutrition not from soil, but from the air and rain). As you would expect, the potted plants prefer ample, frequent watering in a coarse medium with very good drainage.

From the Americas, *Anthurium andreanum* was introduced into Hawaii in 1889. (Hawaii returned

Although anthuriums have been marketed as cut flowers for decades, their popularity began to surge in the 1970s—and it has not stopped growing since then. Anthuriums are among the top ten flowers sold on the Dutch auctions. Between 1999 and 2002, demand for anthuriums worldwide grew by about 38 percent, compared with an increase of 18 percent for such flowers as roses and carnations during the same period.

It's not hard to see why anthuriums are popular. Long known for their exceptional vase life and their original vivid red color, anthuriums now

come in a wide assortment of solid and bi-colors, from the traditional red (bright cherry red to dark maroon) to blazing orange, pastel pinks, mauve, lavender, white and several shades of green. The newest colors available are trendy browns, bronzes, and even a creamy yellow.

The shape of anthuriums has changed too, with the recent introduction of the "tulip" shaped flowers that resemble unfurled, waxy calla lilies. The appearance of new varieties is, of course, partly a response to the interest in anthuriums, but it also serves to stimulate demand.

## Mixing it up

Where anthuriums were once used exclusively in tropical arrangements, today they are frequently mixed into nontropical bouquets—a trend that is facilitated by the availability of so many colors and shapes. Petite new varieties with blooms three to four inches in diameter are likewise more easily combined with other flowers than standard anthuriums (usually about six inches in diameter). The smaller anthuriums are especially popular for wedding work.

*Among the newest and most dramatic introductions to the anthurium market is the enormous, brightly colored Spice, red with green tips and a purple-red spadix. Spice comes in an XXL format of six to more than eight inches and boasts a vase life of no less than 30 days. It is available all year round through FloraHolland and the Aalsmeer Flower Auction.*

*Marysia® has been described as "the yellowest cut anthurium ever." Years of breeding and selection by the Dutch breeder Anthura went into developing a yellow cut anthurium with an adequate production volume. Much more yellow than Benicito, which previously held the title, Marysia retains an attractive haze of pale green, which complements the spadix—creamy white at the base before it turns bright yellow, terminating in a dark green tip.*

*Nunzia can be said to come in an original and an "antique" version, depending on when the flower is cut: if earlier, the base color of the bract is creamy yellow, with strong pink veining and a green tipped spadix. The tip of the bract is also green edged. About four weeks later, if the flower is allowed to remain on the plant, the base colors to pink and the veins darken. Either color combination is unique among cultivars of Anthurium andreanum.*

the favor by giving the world obake anthuriums; the name, which means “ghost” in Japanese, suggests the ethereal quality these large, wavy anthuriums often have, with green or white shading into red, pink or orange.) In Hawaii as elsewhere, a cut-flower industry started in backyards, where the plants were grown under trees. Today cut anthuriums sold in the United States are likely to have been raised in shade houses in Hawaii, California, Florida, or the Netherlands.

## Cuts, pots, and leaves

Anthuriums are also popular as potted plants. While anthurium cut flowers are all cultivars of the species *Anthurium andreanum*—generally a large, loosely structured plant—potted anthuriums are generally cultivars of *A. scherzerianum*, a smaller and more compact species. A few potted anthuriums are newer, smaller cultivars of *A. andreanum* that have been selected specifically for pot culture.

Also available as potted plants are the *Andraecola* types, resulting from hybrids between *A. andreanum* cultivars and dwarf species. *Andraecola* cultivars are small to intermediate in size, fuller and more compact than *A. andreanum*, with thicker, darker leaves. They generally produce smaller and more numerous flowers. Foliage anthuriums represent yet another category of potted plant, available in numerous shapes and sizes. Although they represent a minor portion of the total anthurium pot market, they do offer the consumer a highly durable plant with distinctive forms. The beautiful leaves of the anthurium plant are also available as cut foliage.

## Go for value

In designing with anthuriums, it's important to give the flower some space, says educator, author and consultant René van Rems AlFD, PFCI, of René van Rems International in Vista, California. “Any time you use a novelty flower like a staple flower you lose the value,” he points out. In a classic anthurium design, the flowers might be allowed to float on their long, slender stems like satellites above other flowers placed lower in the design.

And, while it's true there is no hard and fast rule that says you can't combine anthuriums or other tropicals with traditional florist flowers, René advises caution. “Unless it's for a party, the flowers in a design should be shelf-life-compatible,” he says. “The longevity of an arrangement is only as good as its weakest link. If you mix anthuriums, which can last up to a month, with peonies or sweetpeas, you're again not getting the value out of the anthuriums.”

The new colors available expand the options for combining anthuriums with other flowers, although it takes a designer's eye to find the right colors to complement the newer, often muted hues like terra cotta. Likewise, textures should be carefully chosen to enhance that of the anthurium spathe, which can look like plastic next to a soft garden flower, but blends beautifully with hypericum, for example, or finds a pleasing contrast in furry kangaroo paws.

“The anthurium is the epitome of the phenomenon I call ‘personalities in bloom,’ ” notes René. “People either love them or hate them. But for the right person, in the right design style, with the right flowers to enhance their beauty, nothing makes a bigger splash.” 🌿

## Care tips

- Select anthuriums that are free from blemishes and with a spadix that is 50%-75% mature. A mature spadix is rough; an immature spadix is shiny. If flowers are harvested too early (with more than 50% of the spadix immature and shiny), they wilt easily, and vase life is significantly reduced.
- Re-cut stems under water, removing one inch from the stem end. Then, submerge the entire flower in tepid water for about 10 minutes. This ensures that the flowers are fully turgid and decreases the likelihood of their wilting prematurely.
- Gently place stems in water or a flower-food solution, mixed following manufacturer's instructions. Stem ends are easily damaged by dropping them roughly into buckets, resulting in less water uptake and reduction of vase life. Some studies indicate that flower food is not necessary for maximum longevity of anthuriums if the vase water is changed frequently. However, flower food is not harmful to anthuriums, so they can certainly be placed with other blooms in solution for mixed bouquets.
- Store anthuriums at 55 to 70 degrees F and keep the humidity high by covering lightly with a clear plastic bag.
- A significant loss of vase life will occur if anthuriums are stored at (or are exposed to) temperatures below 50 degrees F. Chill damage symptoms include the spathe turning a bluish or purple color, premature wilting of the spathe, and the spadix turning black or dark brown.

## Top 10 Anthuriums

(cut flowers, based on Dutch auction sales in 2006)

1. Tropical (red)
2. Midori (green)
3. Pistache (green)
4. Acropolis (white)
5. Choco (red-brown)
6. Calisto (red)
7. Fantasia (cream)
8. Champagne (cream)
9. Avo Danielle (green)
10. Cheers (pink)