

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

What's the tallest flower you can think of?

WHEN IT'S A QUESTION of height, eremurus (pronounced air-eh-MYOOR-us) comes quickly to mind. In gardens and in the wild, some varieties grow as tall as ten feet high. As a cut flower, eight-foot eremurus is not uncommon, in season, from domestic specialty growers. But even the "short" varieties of eremurus are generally at least two feet tall—and no matter how tall or short, this stately flower always makes the most of its height.

The secret? Eremurus offers not only height, but volume. The spike is thickly covered with starlike, half-inch flowers blooming from the bottom up, like a whole meadow wrapped around a tapered tube.

If you first came to know eremurus ten or twenty years ago, you probably think of it as a bright yellow inflorescence two to three feet high. This is *Eremurus bungei*, also called *E. stenophyllus*, and it is still perhaps the most widely grown species. Being smaller, it ships more easily over long distances, and if you get it from your wholesaler, it may well have been cultivated in Israel or Holland.

Newer on the market are the 'Shelford' and 'Ruiter' hybrids, varieties of *E. x isabellinus*. These typically grow three to four feet tall in a wider range of hues, from white, yellow, orange and apricot to salmon,

The 'Ruiter' hybrids are tall varieties of eremurus that come in a wide range of hues, from white, yellow, orange and apricot to salmon, peach, and pale peachy pink.

Foxtail Lily
Eremurus spp.

Vase life
10 to 14 days

Availability
May through
September

Bunch size
smaller varieties
5 or 10 stems,
larger varieties
sold singly



Blooming early in the season, in the first part of May, *Eremurus himalaicus* bears white flowers densely clustered on a thick stem.

peach and even something very close to pink. "People are always asking for a true pink, but it doesn't really exist," says Andy Siller of Oregon Roses (www.oregonroses.com), where eremurus is harvested from May through mid July.

Over the rainbow

At Oregon Roses, the season begins with *E. himalaicus*, a white flower that starts almost three weeks ahead of any others. (The species name *himalaicus* means "Himalayan" and reminds us that eremurus, also called foxtail lilies or desert candles, are native to the high plains and mountainous regions of central Asia.) Colors come in toward the end of May or early June. At the height of the season, in June, most people purchase a color assortment, but Oregon Roses can also accommodate requests for all one color.

Andy notes that the colorful, later-blooming varieties have thinner stems and look more fragile but are actually quite hardy: "yellows, oranges—there's a healthy, vigorous peach one." It's generally easy to tell quality by looking at the bottommost flowers, which are the first to open up. One tip-off is if the petals on these lower flowers are translucent, which would suggest that the stems have been stored at too cold a temperature: unlike most temperate flowers, "eremurus likes closer to 38 or 40 degrees F than to 33," says Andy.

Oregon Roses sells eremurus in three grades: short, medium, and tall, from 30 to 60 inches and up in stem length, and with a corresponding range in the length of the flower spike, from 12 to 18 inches and more. Indeed, the tallest eremurus stems are available only from domestic growers. The height of the stems makes it difficult to ship them from abroad, as another like Pacific coast grower explains, Martin Mesker of Oregon Flowers (www.oregonflowers.com): "We have them at all sizes, but we concentrate on the tallest ones, up to seven feet. Those stems might get packed 50 stems to a box—which makes the box already 100 pounds. It's an awkward size. The guys at the airport are not always too happy."

Apart from the size and weight, packing tall eremurus to be shipped requires extra padding and support, says Martin: "When you get that many little buds on a stem and put them all together, the buds have a tendency to get intertwined. So we put newspaper between the layers and support the stems with stakes in the box, perpendicular to the stems, so they don't slide. Those big awkward boxes—people sometimes shake them, and you don't want all the heads to move around."

Florists are generally advised to buy eremurus with flowers open on the bottom one-third to one-half of the spike. At Oregon Flowers, however, they try to harvest just before the first flowers pop open. "When they open, they easily damage in shipping," Martin explains. After shipping, the flowers still open up quite well, he says, as long as good care and handling procedures are followed.

Sometime after they bloom, older flowers tend to close up a bit, he observes, so that the most fully open flowers form a band of about eight inches that works its way up the spike. The smaller buds that open later are generally lighter in color. The spike is thus slowly transformed in a way that's fascinating to watch. Of course, if the lower florets wilt, they can also be shaved off.

Straight and narrow

What about the occasional curve you see, most often at the tip of an eremurus inflorescence? "Eremurus are geotropic," says Andy. "If they've been horizontal or diagonal for a while, they'll

start bending. They also tend to keep growing even after they've been cut, like a tulip. The new growth is at the tip, so that's where they want to stretch, and why they get that little gooseneck at the top." For some designers, the bend in the spike is a plus; for others, it's to be avoided. Besides keeping the stem vertical, one strategy for encouraging it to stay straight is to wrap the tip in paper—or leave the paper wrapping on when it comes out of the box—while the stem rehydrates.

A final tip: It may seem odd to think of eremurus as a member of the lily family—but like some of its relatives, eremurus sports prominent anthers that can stain fabrics or wallpaper with their mature pollen if the stems are not handled with care. 🌸

care tips eremurus

- Purchase stems with one-quarter to one-third of the flowers open. Avoid stems that have black or brown soft areas or overly curved stems (unless that is personally desirable).
- If the flower head is slightly flattened due to shipping, gently spin the flower stem between your hands to fluff it out again.
- Remove the bottom 1 to 2 inches of the stem end and place in a tepid floral food solution. Condition at room temperature for 1 to 2 hours, then store in floral refrigerator at 36 to 40 degrees F and 85 percent humidity.
- If not done by your supplier, treat eremurus with an ethylene inhibitor according to manufacturer instructions. Ethylene damage will cause premature wilting of flowers and flower buds to fall off instead of opening.
- Store flowers upright in tall buckets to keep the flower tips straight. Flower tips are geotropic and will bend upward if angled or placed horizontally in designs.