

fresh

focus



An ever-fresh classic, gerberas could be the hippest flower on the market today.

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

What accounts for the incredible, and rising, popularity of gerberas? It has to be the combination of an iconic flower shape with a wide range of vivid colors. On both counts—shape and color—gerberas have received special attention from breeders in recent years, with the consequence that striking new varieties seem to come onto the market almost daily. Imported into Europe from South Africa in the late 19th century, it wasn't until the 1930s that gerberas became a commercial cut flower in North America. Yet today, total sales of gerberas in the United States constitute the third largest in the industry. Gerberas also hold the fifth position in total sales on the flower auctions of Holland.

With more than 300 cut-flower cultivars currently available, gerberas come in almost any color imaginable, including many bicolor combinations. Almost all gerberas sport the classic daisy shape shared with other

members of the vast Asteraceae family, which includes sunflowers, chrysanthemums, and asters. In botanical terms, the inflorescence is made up of many individual flowers: an outer row of ray flowers surrounding an “eye” of disk flowers. The blooms may be **singles** (with a green center and a row of non-overlapping petals, or ray florets); **doubles** (with a green, black, or dark red eye and a double row of overlapping petals); **crested doubles** (add one or more inner rows of shorter petals); or **full crested doubles** (the inner row of petals diminishes in size, covering the eye entirely).

Breeders have developed the aptly named **spider gerberas**, with spiky, slender petals reminiscent of spider mums, and both regular and spider gerberas are now available as **mini gerberas**, also known as Germinis. Mini gerberas offer at least two advantages: The smaller heads (about two inches in diameter, versus three or four for a standard gerbera) work better in mixed bouquets. In addition to smaller heads, mini gerberas typically have stronger stems, minimizing the danger of “bent neck.”

Promoting strong stems

If there is a downside to gerberas, it's the susceptibility of these flowers to problems with stem blockage resulting from bacteria. Cleanliness is especially important with gerberas at every stage of growing and shipping and in the retail flower shop. Industry experts have devised special treatment and handling procedures to insure

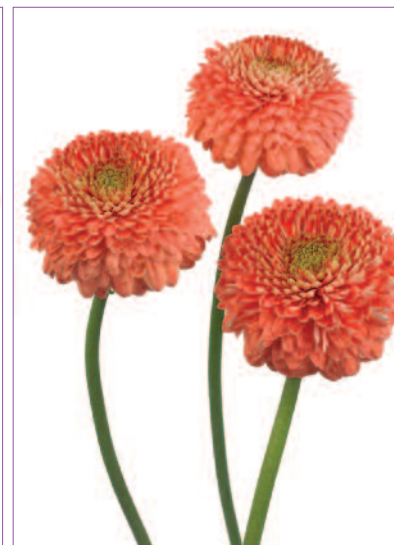
that florists will not have a resort to wiring the stems, a technique that tends to produce disappointing results, and that consumers can enjoy gerberas for a long time in the home.

One technique is to protect the flower heads with netting or cups (small plastic sleeves for individual flower heads). When the flowers are shipped dry and later recut and placed in flower buckets, these also serve to hold the heads upright while the stems “harden” (become turgid as they refill with water).

A newer development is the use of perforated cards or racquets for shipping, hardening, or both. The stems are slipped through the holes in the card and suspended with the cut ends dangling in hydration or flower-food solution. This ensures that the stem is straight while it hardens and helps to keep the cut end free of the bacteria that tend to collect on the bottom of the bucket or Procona container.

In addition, experts advocate a shallow solution. The stems of gerberas are lined with tiny hairs that can transport water or solution up the outside of the stem, promoting disease.

Ideally, gerberas are stored in a bucket by themselves. Likewise, customers may like to know that if they place gerberas alone in a vase, they can add few drops of bleach to the water for prolonged vase life. In mixed bouquets, the bleach could damage other flowers. Special commercially prepared flower food is available for use with gerberas and roses combined with other flowers. 🌿



Gerbera, Transvaal Daisy
Gerbera jamesonii

Availability: year round

Bunch size: sold singly or in trays of 32-50

Vase life: 4 to 10 days

Recent gerbera introductions include *Daikiri* (opposite page), *High Society* (top left), *Fiction* (top right), and *Isabelle* (below). The last three are excellent examples of crested doubles, with an inner row of shorter petals between the ray florets and the central eye. Novelties include such exotic varieties as *Pasta di Mamma*®, with furling petals not unlike cooked linguine, and *Saturnus*, in the *Gerrondo*® series, promoted as “the cuddliest gerbera ever” with 450 to 500 petals and a spherical shape. Photos courtesy of the Flower Council of Holland.



Care tips

- Choose or request flowers that have at least two rows of pollen showing on the center disk. Immature flowers are less durable and more likely to wilt.
- Avoid blossoms with brown petal edges or stems that are bruised, split or discolored.
- Treat with a citric acid hydration solution following manufacturer's instructions. Transfer to a flower-food solution and condition at room temperature for two to four hours.
- Gerberas have soft stems that are easily damaged by cutting with shears or scissors. Research has shown that cutting stems with a very sharp knife can double vase life.
- Hanging gerberas through wire mesh or a cardboard grid, so that their stem ends do not touch the bottoms of buckets, prevents damage to the stem ends and subsequent restrictions of water uptake.
- Gerberas are sensitive to fluoride, which is present in some public water supplies and can cause petal tips to burn.
- Store gerberas in a 38-to-42-degree F cooler with 85% humidity.