

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

You've met Ginger. Get to know the whole family.



Ginger

Alpinia purpurata,
Etlingera elatior, *Zingiber*
spectabile and others

Vase life
10 to 17 days

Availability
year round

Bunch size
sold by the
single stem

WHEN YOU THINK of tropical flowers, what flower comes first to mind? It might well be ginger: sturdy, waxy, and dramatic in a range of "tropical" colors, especially red, with flower heads as big as eight inches long, on straight stems that may be in excess of three feet.

But which ginger do you think of? Shell ginger (*Alpinia purpurata*), with its elongated, often slightly curving flower head in bright red or soft pink? Torch ginger (*Etlingera elatior*), with outer bracts unfurling from a round, compact inflorescence? Or the aptly named beehive ginger (*Zingiber spectabile*), a dense ovoid covered in tightly overlapping bracts in shades of yellow, orange, green, and brown as well as red and pink?

Of these, all are members of the wide-ranging ginger family, the Zingiberaceae. Only the last, however, is in the same genus with culinary ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), also known as root ginger, the plant whose fleshy rhizome is familiar as a pungent fresh spice.

Still other cut tropical flowers may be known as gingers, whether or not they belong to the ginger family. These include flowers in the more distantly related genera *Calathea* and *Costus*. Yet another genus and species, *Tapeinochilos ananassae*, bears the common name Indonesian wax ginger. You may have seen *Curcuma* flowers in the marketplace, a genus that does belong to the ginger family, although the flower heads look more like bromeliads.

At left, 'Jungle King' is a new variety of shell ginger with a classic look. The illustrations to this article are taken from *Neotropica*, the useful and stylish guide to tropical plants from Hawaii, published by Design358. The guide, authored by Hitomi Gilliam AIFD and Lois Hiranaga AIFD, offers both product information and design inspiration. To learn more, visit www.design358.com.

Celebrate diversity

The good news is that all of these flowers offer dramatic color and form along with outstanding vase life. The variety of “gingers” may be confusing, but for adventurous florists and their customers, it spells opportunity.

Many florists, if they are familiar with gingers at all, have only seen the more standard varieties of shell or beehive ginger. And these are certainly the most consistently popular and available varieties. But some growers are branching out into gingers with even more potential to fascinate customers and build a distinctive reputation for your shop.

“We need to educate people about these flowers so that retailers know to ask for them and consumers can appreciate them,” says Hawaiian grower David Brown Jr. of Maui

care tips ginger

- Purchase fully colored flowers, as gingers will not mature appreciably after cutting.
- Avoid flowers that have a bluish or grayish cast, a sign of chill damage.
- Process gingers by cutting 1-2 inches from the stem ends and then placing them in a floral food solution. If flowers are dehydrated, place the entire flower head in a large sink or basin filled with plain tepid water. Soak for 20-30 minutes and then place upright into a floral food solution.
- Store at 55 degrees F and 90 percent humidity. Temperatures below 50 degrees F will cause chill damage and greatly reduce vase life.
- Misting with plain tepid water and covering with clear plastic will help maintain high humidity needed for proper storage of ginger flowers.



The pink shell ginger at top is 'Eileen McDonald'. At left, the beehive ginger 'Singapore Gold', with the true, botanical flower peeking out from among the bracts. Above, the fascinating 'Black Tulip Torch' (*Etlingera hemisphaerica*) is available in spring and summer.

Tropicals and Foliage. David cites the publication of the Hawaii tropical flowers and plant guide *Neotropica* as a step in the right direction. Although ginger is grown in many tropical regions of the world, much of the ginger destined for the U.S. market is from Hawaii, as well as from islands in the Caribbean.

The most common gingers are available year-round, says David, but some of the newer and more unusual varieties may be limited seasonally. An example is 'Polynesian Princess', a variegated shell ginger with light pink borders on a darker pink bract, which yields a candy-cane effect. "You don't see a lot of it yet, because it's not easy to grow," says David—a factor that only lends a greater cachet to this novelty.

David notes rising interest in green and brown flowers, including the brown calatheas known as "cigar," "Tootsie Roll," or "Havana."

Get the best

Gingers are naturally hardy, but you still want to buy only the freshest, best quality. "Always look for the thicker stems," David advises. "Make sure the flower head doesn't feel limp or floppy. You look for a tightness, so the flower head is not completely closed, but not full blown." It will continue to open up a little bit after harvest, David assures.

Occasionally you will see a ginger inflorescence with one or two of the real, botanical flowers peeping out from the bracts. While these can add interest, they do indicate that the stem is a little past its prime.

Don't take the long vase life of ginger entirely for granted, says David: recut the stem end at an angle and get it into water with a few drops of bleach as soon as possible. (Some experts will recommend flower food, but David believes the dilute bleach solution is adequate.)

Such a deal

As costly as ginger can be compared with other florist flowers, it's a good value. In fact, much of it is underpriced, according to David Brown, Jr.: "The pricing was originally established without regard for the fact that many gingers are labor-intensive, because the leaves have to be trimmed and the heads hand-washed" to make sure little bugs won't

crawl out of them. (The bugs aren't harmful to the flower or to consumers but could mean that the USDA would reject a shipment from the islands to the mainland.) A hot-bath treatment is sometimes used that gets rid of bugs, including larvae, without harming the flower—but again, it adds to the cost.

While the cost to the grower of harvesting and processing gingers can vary quite a lot by flower type and other factors, the differences are generally averaged out, so that sometimes there's a regular markup from grower to wholesaler or retailer, other times very little.

So don't let gingers intimidate you! "Take a chance and try a new, different ginger you haven't used before," suggests David Brown, Jr. "It's out there." 🌿

design tips with ginger

- Ginger flowers typically arrive with some foliage just below the flower. Be sure to remove this foliage, as it curls and dries up in two or three days.
- Create dramatic lines with shell ginger by using the flowers in pairs and shadowing the curve of one flower head with another.
- Leftover ginger stems can be used to create natural-looking stem extenders. Simply hollow out the top end of the stem and place a water tube in the cavity. Fill with water and add a couple stems of spray orchids or several stems of bear grass.
- Take a hint from Hawaiian royalty, who wore leis made from the waxy "petals" of shell gingers for important ceremonies: thread the individual bracts from these flowers on thin-gauge wire, and allow the garlands to dangle from a bridal bouquet.



Although not technically gingers, the many diverse calatheas and costus flowers can be considered as such. At top is 'Green Ice', a variety of *Calathea burle-marxii*; directly above is *Costus stenophyllus*, also known as bamboo or red snake ginger.