

handle with care

By Bruce Wright

The first step in flower quality is to buy quality product.



IT SEEMS OBVIOUS: UNLESS you buy the best flowers—meaning, the best varieties, nurtured by growers and handled by importers, shippers and wholesalers with integrity and expertise—all your own efforts to prolong the life of your cut flowers will be a waste. There is no substitute for starting out with high-quality materials.

The problem is this: quality isn't so easy to define or detect. With cut flowers, the true test of quality isn't how the flower looks when it arrives in your shop. The test is how the flower looks five or ten days later, in your customer's home.

In real life most florists weigh their perceptions about quality against other factors—principally cost, but also convenience. Cost and convenience are easy enough to measure and assess. Quality is more subjective and, as stated, disappointing quality is often not ap-

parent until after the flowers have left your shop.

Trust, but verify

How can you know for sure what kind of performance you're getting out of the flowers you buy? The first and best answer is: conduct your own in-house testing. Performance testing gives you the best feedback you can get about the integrity of your suppliers, the effectiveness of your own care and handling procedures, and even which varieties offer the best vase life. True, it takes time and diligence. You can't rely on just one test; testing should really be ongoing to give reliable results. But it's well worth the effort.

You don't have to test every flower that goes through your shop. "Take the top flowers you buy in volume," suggests W. Kurt Schroeder

AIFD, AAF, PFCI, of WKS Associates in Deptford, New Jersey, a floral-industry consultant and an expert on postharvest care. These would likely include roses, carnations, and lilies; in all three cases, results will vary depending on what variety you are testing—a good reason to keep repeating the test.

Kurt suggests using a simple test protocol that is provided by Floralife, the maker of postharvest care products, on its website (www.floralife.com: under "Literature" at the top of the page, click on "Care and Handling Book" and download the entire booklet, available as a PDF). "This is the same procedure Floralife researchers have used in their labs and recommend to high schools to use," notes Kurt.

In the booklet, the procedure (page 14) is first set forth as an experiment to see the effect of putting flowers in flower-food solution ver-

sus plain water. But the same procedure can be used to compare the vase life of flowers from one supplier versus another, or of one variety versus another, or simply to find out how long your flowers might be lasting in your customers' homes. Ethylene-sensitive flowers such as carnations can be tested using the "EthylBloc® apple test," on page 9 of the booklet, to find out whether they have been given an anti-ethylene treatment by the grower.

The point to emphasize about testing is that it should be an ongoing part of your quality control program. Set up a small area of the shop devoted to testing. Don't make any purchasing or care-and-handling decisions based on just one test. But if you're testing all the time, you'll have information that will save you money and protect your reputation. You'll be able to make smart purchasing decisions, and you and your staff will be that much more aware every day of what happens to your flowers after they leave the shop.

Know your varieties

Many florists still order flowers mainly by color. And when they do use a variety name, it might be as a kind of shorthand for the color: a 'Jade' rose, a 'Kermil' spray mum, a 'Moon-shadow' carnation.

Indeed, you might be more familiar with your preference for a certain variety of apple—maybe you like Fujis better than Galas—than with the relative performance of 'Forever Young' versus 'Charlotte' roses. Some wholesalers are equally at fault when it comes to variety awareness, finding it more convenient to market flowers by color without reference to the name.

But if you really know your varieties, you know that a certain rose variety not only offers a bright, vibrant shade of true red, but tends to open wide and hold that full, rounded shape for days on end, resisting problems with bent neck or botrytis infection. It takes some effort to acquire this kind of knowledge, but once you do, you can make smarter purchasing deci-

sions, impress customers, do a better job of marketing your designs, and even become a more sensitive designer. Shouldn't you know your flowers well enough to call them by name?



The Society of American Florists' annual Outstanding Varieties Competition is one opportunity to learn about varieties that perform well in the vase. Entries are on display during the SAF convention and winners are reported in SAF's Floral Management magazine. Among the Best in Class winners last year that were specially noted for long vase life: 'Barbatus Green Ball' dianthus from Golden Flowers, 'Corazon' roses from Equiflor/Rio Roses, and 'Baby Doll' alstroemeria from Fresca Farms.

Know your suppliers

Almost all florists buy fresh flowers from wholesalers; some also buy direct from growers. In either case, there are questions you need to ask your suppliers about how they handle flowers before they get to you. Ideally you can also visit important suppliers to judge for yourself.

It might be a little more difficult with grow-

ers. As a retailer, you probably don't even know about all the things growers can do right—or wrong. Some "best practices" might even run counter to your intuition. When flower growers attempt to place cut flowers immediately into

solution the moment they have been harvested, for example, out in the field or in the greenhouse, the results are often inferior. The industry consensus is that it's better to wait until the flowers have been graded and bunched. At this point you have a better chance of keeping the solution clean.

However, there are certain basic things you want to know about how your flowers were treated by the grower:

- **Solutions and sanitation.** If these are ethylene-sensitive flowers, have they been treated with STS (silver thiosulfate) or another anti-ethylene agent? This and other treatments are often assumed to have been given, but it's still a good idea to ask. Putting flowers in plain water is not good enough. Some flowers need hormone treatments; for others the first treatment should be with an acidifier or with a solution that contains sugar. All flowers need to be protected from the bacteria that will otherwise clog the stems and take away the benefit of any other hydrating treatment. How often does the grower change the buckets that are used for holding flowers?

- **Cooling.** How soon after the flowers are cut do they reach an environment where they are being cooled to a temperature low enough to slow their metabolism? Industry experts agree that should take no longer than 50 minutes. Following grading and packing in boxes, the boxes should be precooled before they are shipped.

- **Grading and bunching.** Nowadays most growers follow standard grading specifications regarding things like stem length and the number of stems to a bunch. One thing you can easily observe yourself, however, is whether all the stems in a bunch that arrives in your shop are even at the bottom. "If not, guess which one doesn't get re-cut?" says Gay Smith, tech-

nical consulting manager for Chrystal Americas. “The stem that’s too short. Also, growers sometimes put the twistie or rubber band too low, so you can’t recut the end without cutting it off. Or in the case of soft stems like callas or gerberas, they sometimes cinch it too tight,” causing mechanical damage to the stem.

- **Pesticides.** You may also want to ask suppliers about what chemicals have been sprayed on the flowers you buy. Florists are among those who have a high level of exposure to these chemicals, simply because they handle the product all day long. Very few bother to protect themselves with gloves. It helps to be aware, for your own health and safety.

You may think you won’t get candid answers to these questions—and testing of cut flowers is still recommended as a backup. But asking them puts your growers and wholesalers on notice that you care, and begins a dialogue that can only benefit you and your customers.

Taking the temperature

When cut flowers are shipped to you dry in a box, ask the grower to include a temperature recorder. If you have a relationship with the grower, they should be willing to do this. After reading it yourself, you can send the recorder back to the grower, and the information on it lets both of you know what the temperature was inside the box when the flowers started on their journey, and what the fluctuations were while the flowers were on their way. A common brand of recorder is called a Temp-Tale monitor.

It’s also possible to sample the temperature inside a newly arrived box of flowers using a kitchen needle thermometer, says Gay. “Don’t put it through the precooling holes in the boxes,” she warns. “Poke it through the cardboard right into the guts of the bunches” and leave it there long enough to get a fair reading. The temperature should definitely not be warmer than 40 degrees Fahrenheit.



Winning Best in Show at last year’s Outstanding Varieties Competition was ‘Jiuhbao Sweetie’ from Transflora/DVFG. The phalaenopsis orchid, available in white as well as an electric fuchsia with white trim encircling the petals, boasts an extraordinary vase life of 20-plus days.

I witness

Every florist should visit their wholesaler regularly, Kurt Schroeder advises: “It doesn’t have to be once a week, but once a month. Ask questions, but also be observant. When you visit you can see more in 10 minutes than you find out over the phone in an hour.”

Many of the processing questions you would ask a grower apply to wholesalers as well. Have they used appropriate flower foods, specific to roses and bulb flowers, to rehydrate and store these flowers? Do they check the temperature of incoming flowers and if necessary, cool them down immediately when they arrive? Don’t assume that your wholesaler should be rehydrating all flowers and holding them in buckets, however. If flowers will not be sold the same day, they will likely last longer if they are stored dry, as long as they are at the appropriate low temperature and high relative humidity.

You may be able to see the cooler temper-

atures; ideally, thermometers are clearly visible on the outside of the coolers that tell the temperature on the inside. “There are three questions to ask about that,” says Kurt. “Are the thermometers present? Are they working? And are they at 34-36 degrees Fahrenheit?” Kurt estimates that as many as 75% of the coolers in both wholesale and retail florist operations are running too warm.

In addition, taking visual notes at your wholesaler’s, you may want to ask yourself, Are the coolers clean? The buckets? Floors dry? Are there boxes of flowers sitting around outside the coolers?

Consider standing orders

Standing orders are usually recommended for other reasons—like saving money and time. But they also offer freshness benefits. Whether you get those flowers direct from the grower or order them through your wholesaler, standing orders generally mean flowers that have undergone a minimum of storage.

“If you call up ABC Wholesaler and order a few bunches of alstroemeria, for example, there’s a great chance as they pull that order that it has been stored and rotated, whether in the wholesaler’s cooler, at a farm in South America, or somewhere else along the line,” says Kurt. “But if you preorder a quarter box of alstroemeria, those flowers are picked for you.” They never enter a pool of flowers waiting to be sold. Not only do they make their way more quickly to you, but they are handled less often, reducing the danger of mechanical damage. And this is true whether you’re ordering farm-direct flowers or taking advantage of your wholesaler’s relationships with farms and the benefits of cold-chain distribution. “Wholesalers would love it, and you would benefit greatly, if you preorder even a quarter of your product,” Kurt concludes.

The next step, of course, is treating your flowers well from the moment they arrive in your shop. More on that in the March issue of *Flowers&*. 🌸