

# handle with care

By Bruce Wright

## How can you prolong the life of cut flowers, even after they leave the shop?



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As we know from study after study, consumers care about making flowers last. This is a chance for you to highlight your professionalism and expertise and to show customers you care. "It's the final frontier for quality," says Marie Ackerman AIFD, AAF, PFCI, Teleflora's Vice President of Education.

**Stay cool** It all starts with delivery—and "the delivery process starts with making sure the arrangement, once it's finished, goes back in the cooler until it actually gets loaded into the van," says floral industry consultant W. Kurt Schroeder AIFD, AAF, PFCI, of South Jersey Floral Company in Deptford, New Jersey—"not in a warm garage or onto a side table." Maintaining the cold chain is just as important for finished arrangements as it is for cut flowers on their way to your shop.

The same goes for your delivery vans. Very few florists have refrigerated trucks for delivery; most rely on air conditioning. But there's no doubt that a refrigerated truck is far superior—especially when you consider that in a vanload of delivery items, ethylene-sensitive fresh flowers may be combined with ethylene-producing fruit baskets. (The warmer the environment, the more damage ethylene will do to the flowers.)

**Stay wet** Hydration is, of course, just as important as the chill factor. If you sell or deliver loose cut flowers or hand-tied bouquets, consider wrapping the cut stem ends in Arrive Alive® packaging, which keeps them hydrated even if they are not purchased with a vase (more at [www.machortsupplies.com](http://www.machortsupplies.com)).

WE'VE BEEN TAKING care and handling step by step through the journey of a cut flower from the grower to your shop—from purchasing and receiving to processing, storing and arranging. But what happens when the flower leaves your shop? At that point, care and handling is out of your hands, right?

Not quite. It's really up to you to make sure, first of all, that your flowers actually reach the consumer in great shape, and second, that the recipient of flowers sent from your shop is well informed about how to take care of them.

How long flowers last in the home can be a sore point. Yes, sometimes customers blame florists for flowers that died because they were placed on top of the heater. But taking responsibility for your flowers, even after they've left the shop, isn't a liability—it's an opportunity.

**"The delivery process starts with putting the arrangement back in the cooler until it actually gets loaded into the van."**

**Petal perfect** Mechanical damage during delivery is another issue. Your delivery van should be equipped with one or another of the systems and delivery aids that keep arrangements upright and stable. (Check “Delivery Systems, Trays, Accessories” in your *Flowers&* Buyer’s Guide, published as part of the June 2011 issue of *Flowers&* and also available online at [www.flowersandmagazine.com](http://www.flowersandmagazine.com).)

“You want your flowers to arrive petal perfect,” says Kurt. “If you break one flower, from the customer’s point of view, the arrangement is ruined. It’s a training issue for drivers.” Marie agrees: “The driver should be trained to see that no flowers are broken, and if they are, to remove or replace them; to see that no foliage is floating in the water. If something isn’t right, the driver should be able to fix it or return it and not get in trouble for that.”

Drivers need to know how to protect flowers in extreme weather. If it’s below freezing outside, for example, the driver may need to call the recipient from the van, rather than getting out of the van with the arrangement or plant, ringing the doorbell, and waiting perhaps ten minutes outside for someone to answer the door.

**Driver ed** Ideally, drivers can do a lot more than that. The best way to deliver care and handling information is in person. “You can have a care card that says, ‘Add water daily,’ but most people still won’t do it,” says Marie. “It really helps if the driver says, ‘Be sure to add water within 24 hours.’ You have to get the recipient’s attention first—because when they first see the flowers they’re all, ‘For me?’ Once you know they’re listening, tell them to add water, and definitely give them a time limit.”

In the best-case scenario, the driver is an able ambassador for the shop. He or she should be ready to answer questions like, “What kind of plant is this?” He should also be able to pass along care tips—in a diplomatic way that sends the message, “We want you to have the best experience with these flowers possible” (not, “If the flowers don’t last, it will be your fault”).

Of course, not all drivers will possess that kind of tact and expertise. With delivery pools and part-time drivers, many florists have limited opportunity for driver training. If you don’t already have a set of basic guidelines that covers care and handling for drivers along with policy matters, you may want to write and print one.

But you also need to make care and handling information available to customers and recipients with printed materials, on your website, and by phone—and tell your drivers to point customers to all of these. At the very least, drivers should know to say, “If you have any questions or comments, please call us at the shop. The number is on the card right here...”

**Be the expert** What to tell consumers? You’ll find a great example of guidelines for cut-flower care on the Society of American Florists’ consumer website, [www.abouflow.com](http://www.abouflow.com). It doesn’t hurt to quote from these guidelines, saying, “The Society of American Florists recommends...”, which lets your customers know you are professionally active and aware. You can even point customers to [www.abouflow.com](http://www.abouflow.com). Guidelines for consumers are also available on [www.teleflora.com](http://www.teleflora.com).

However, you should make sure that customers can find such care information directly on your own website, in a version that has your own stamp and spin. “You’re the expert,” says Marie. “Be specific to your area: for example, if you’re in a warm, dry area, you might recommend mist-

## “Flower-food packets should be included with your packaging costs.”

ing the flowers.” Consider discussing the special situations that aren’t always addressed in standard care tips, like prom corsages.

Remember that tips you take for granted may be new to customers, like a reminder to remove flowers from the arrangement after they’re spent, or to water a plant at the sink rather than over your mahogany table.

Make written care tips available in depth on your website, but also provide basic, easy-to-read information on a card that is left with the delivered arrangement. “Make it large print on an index card,” suggests Kurt, “as opposed to the small print on the back of an enclosure card that’s hard to read and easy to miss altogether.” Encourage customers to visit your website or call with questions.

Florists who give classes or talks to local clubs and organizations about cut flowers know that customers are always interested in this subject. When you share this type of information, people feel you are giving them something of value. If you’re an experienced public speaker, you might even make a video clip that you can post on your website.

Use all the media available to you, and let them reinforce each other in letting customers know you are an expert on making flowers last, always willing to share your knowledge.

**Flower-food packets** If there’s one thing that could probably make customers a lot happier with how long their flowers last, it’s flower food. Unfortunately, it’s all too often the case that florists don’t provide it, or don’t provide enough.

Consumer packets of flower food are generally available in units of five grams or 10 grams. A five-gram packet generally treats a pint of water, while a 10-gram packet generally treats a quart of water. At one time, 10-gram packets were prevalent in the industry. When grocery stores started selling flowers, the less-expensive five-gram packets became more popular. The problem is that consumers very often need to mix more than a pint of flower-food solution. And when they do, if all they have is one five-gram packet, they will probably simply add more water. The result is

an overly dilute solution that does more harm than good.

“Most professional retail florists, unless they’re doing bud vases, should only be handling 10-gram packets,” Kurt believes. “They should give them away and include the cost as part of their packaging costs, just like ribbon, enclosure cards and cellophane. The amount of the flower food should be appropriate for the size and type of the floral gift. But then, they should also price the packets at retail and be prepared to sell them to customers who want more, not just give them away. You want customers to know that they have value.”

Consumers show a persistent interest in home remedies—which only proves that there is a demand for the real thing. It’s important, however, Kurt notes, to lead customers away from pennies and ginger ale and toward using scientifically proven, professional flower food, properly mixed according to directions.

**Getting feedback** Ultimately, the fate of your flowers after they leave the shop depends on good communication with your customers. This, of course, is something you also want to encourage for its own sake. One strategy that has been used with success, Kurt suggests, is to include a postage-paid comment card with every design that goes out of the shop (except sympathy designs). On the back of the card are boxes, easy to check off, for the recipient to let you know what they liked or didn’t like about the gift they got from your shop, in terms of design, service, and freshness. At the top, the card reads, “This floral gift was especially designed for you by...” and in the blank that follows, the designer writes in his or her first name.

Most cards come back with positive comments—a nice pat on the back for the designer. But cards like these can also let you know if a recipient is unhappy, so you can take care of it right away. They remind the recipient that the design has been hand crafted by a floral artist who takes pride in his or her work. Part of that pride lies in creating an arrangement designed to last—in partnership with an informed, and grateful, consumer. 🌸