

fresh

focus

How did hypericum go from being a seasonal novelty to a year-round floral-design staple?

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Hypericum spp

Availability: year round

Bunch size: 6-10 stems

Vase life: 14 to 21 days

Hypericum is a dramatic success story. In fact, it ranks as the most successful berry-bearing cut

floral material to date. From just a few acres of production in the 1980s, hypericum is now ranked at number fifteen in sales through the Dutch auctions. (It reached number eleven in the year 2000, after a five-year growth spurt in the second half of the 1990s. From 1997 to 1999 alone, production increased by 44 percent!) With the ongoing introduction of new colors, hypericum has consolidated its place in the market and may at some point even eclipse alstroemeria in total production area by growers.

Why does everybody love hypericum? Let's start with the obvious. The smooth, shiny berries provide textural contrast to the satiny petals of many flowers, creating strong visual interest. Breeding has expanded the color range from the classic rusty reds and browns to the newer pink, green, gold, red, and even salmon and cream-colored varieties.

In the cut-flower market, popularity and availability often serve to spur each other, making it difficult to say which came first. But for hypericum, a turning point came when the berries, previously a seasonal product, became available year-round. Hypericum is almost always grown outdoors, which limits the harvest season

to summer and fall in northern climates. Today, however, hypericum is also grown in equatorial countries, especially Ecuador and (for the European market) Zimbabwe, where it can be cut and shipped all year long.

The globalization of hypericum has had another effect on the presentation of the product itself. The natural stems include laterals with berries all up and down the stem. To make the product easier to pack and cheaper to transport, growers in southern climates typically remove the side stems, resulting in a slim stem with a cluster of berries at the tip. Such stems also lend themselves to inclusion in mixed bunches.

From two to many

Hypericum varieties may differ, not only in color, but also in the size and shape of their berries and leaves. In the beginning there were two main types of hypericum grown for ornamental use: *Hypericum androsaemum*, with round, red berries, and *Hypericum x inodorum*, with elliptical, orange-red berries. The two types are closely related, however, and today's hybrids cover a range of intermediate shapes.



Hypericum is often marketed simply by color, as in the photos on the opposite page, courtesy of Stems&Bunches (stemsandbunches.com). Certain varieties, however, have gained leading market share, including those in the Flair series, pictured above (photo courtesy of Hyperactive Farms, hyperactivefarms.com): from left to right, Mystic Flair, Ivy Flair, cranberry-colored Jolly Flair, and Pinky Flair.

Lasting power

Because hypericum is grown out of doors, the quality of the stems may be affected by weather conditions including rain and wind. The plant can also be attacked by rust, a fungus that causes brown marks to appear on the leaves.

Although we think of hypericum as hardy—and it does indeed have a remarkable vase life—some qualifiers must attend our expectations. The weak point is the leaves, not the berries. The foliage remains attractive much longer when the stems are shipped and stored in water. Flower food, with its antibacterial action, may not specifically benefit hypericum so much in terms of vase

life, but the presence of hypericum stems in a mixed bouquet will tend to encourage the growth of bacteria unless flower-food solution is used.

Customers may ask if hypericum is related to the herb St. John's wort, sometimes taken for the treatment of depression. It is indeed a relative, though St. John's wort belongs to a different species, *H. perforatum*. In the Middle Ages it was thought to keep away evil spirits. People hung bunches of the medicinal herb in their homes, where it released a fragrance like incense as it dried. Although not especially fragrant, today's hypericum berries retain the power to drive out evil spirits with their cheerful and colorful, long-lasting beauty. 🌿

Care tips

- Purchase hypericum berries that are plump and free from brown or gray spots. Leaves should be dark green and also without brown or black spots. Each stem should contain 7-12 berries, with the berry size determined by variety.
- Remove plastic packing sleeves to prevent botrytis mold from forming on the berries or upper leaves.
- Remove all but the topmost leaves from the stem, as the leaves last only a short time compared to the berries.
- Slant-cut 1-2 inches from the stem end and place in a tepid floral food solution. Condition at room temperature several hours or overnight prior to placing in a 38-40 degree F cooler.

