



fresh

focus



With savvy purchasing and marketing, lilies offer retail florists a good way to stand out from the crowd.

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

Lilies
Lilium hybrids

Availability: year round
Number / bunch: 10 stems
Vase life: 5 to 10 days
(depends upon bud count)

Second only to roses in their mystique, lilies have been cultivated for centuries in almost every part of the globe. From China and Japan across the Asian continent to the Middle East and southern Europe, all the way to North America, the genus *Lilium* contains over 100 separate natural species.

Today, however, man-made hybrids are bringing even more variety to this large genus. First bred as garden flowers, lilies in such brand-new categories

as LA, LO, and OT have been picked up by the cut-flower industry and are becoming more commonly available as growers increase production.

Further, lilies are becoming available from more different sources, at different levels of price and quality. These developments give traditional retail florists a fine opportunity to differentiate themselves from the competition, especially from mass marketers.

Quality counts

Like other bulb flowers, lilies have long been considered a specialty of Dutch and California growers. More recently, growers in Costa Rica and Colombia have begun to produce lilies of good quality—not quite as good as the premium lilies from Holland and California, but better than in the past and relatively inexpensive.

The result is a tiered market in which, more and more, some lilies are bought and sold as commodities—identified by color and selected by price—while others are identified by variety name and purchased with a greater concern for the relationship of price to quality. For retail florists, some “commodity” lilies might be a good buy, depending on the use to which they will be put. Will you snip blooms and buds from the main stem and place them in a foam-based arrangement? Or will you use the whole tall stem, complete with unblemished foliage, in a wedding centerpiece in an elegant vase?

Lilies are often graded according to the bud or flower count on each stem, starting with 1-2 buds and going up to 5-6. This system, however, provides only a rough index of quality. The quality of lilies begins with the bulb: larger,

better-quality, more expensive bulbs produce larger, better-quality, more expensive flowers. Then of course, the care that is given to lilies as they are grown and harvested influences the longevity, color and condition of the blooms and foliage. (South American lilies are typically field grown, whereas Dutch and California lilies are more likely to have been sheltered in the controlled environment of a greenhouse.)

The Dutch grower and exporter Hilverda de Boer recently created a quality assurance program called Supreme Selections, a branding effort that comprises lilies from a handful of premium Dutch growers. Part of the idea behind a program like this is to encourage florists and others buyers to get acquainted with more different varieties. “People tend to keep ordering the same variety if they’ve had good luck with it,” says F.J. Trzuskowski of Teleflora’s Stems and Bunches. “But if they come to know and trust the brand, they’ll be more willing to try something a little different. It’s not that you buy a pink Oriental and don’t care whether it’s Stargazer or Starfighter or Barbaresco. Rather, maybe you and some of your customers already know Stargazer, or Casa Blanca, but one day they come in and you can say to them, ‘Look at this lily we just got in, it’s a little darker pink than Stargazer,’ or ‘Check out this beautiful white Oriental lily—it’s called Sapporo and it’s like Casa Blanca except it faces more upward, which gives it a different look.’ That’s what turns customers into connoisseurs and gives them an extra reason to come to your shop.”

The fascinating new varieties on the market aren’t just white and pink; they include such dramatic beauties as the dark purple Sumatra or

the yellow and white OT hybrid Conca D’Or. Longiflorum or “Easter” lilies are available all year long, in versatile color selections other than white. Lilies with a branching or outward-facing growth habit, in particular, lend themselves to dramatic design and display of a kind that leverages a professional florist’s creative skill.

The good news is that some growers are now making premium lilies available to retailers in smaller packs—for example, 20 stems of white and 20 of pink lilies in one box, versus 100 of one color, which had been the standard minimum in the past for buying farm-direct. That means you can “branch out” with lilies of the very best quality, variety and freshness—thereby sending exactly the right message about your business with a flower that makes the statement loud and clear. 🌸



Among the latest lily hybrids from Holland is Shocking (below and on the opposite page), an OT lily (see the chart below) with a reddish yellow flower and a slightly sweet fragrance. OTs are similar in shape to Oriental lilies but offer larger blooms, improved vase life, shorter cultivation time and improved resistance to disease. Above left is Prince Promise, an LO lily with the look and shape of a longiflorum (Easter) lily and a mild fragrance, like an Oriental. Above right is Carmine Diamond, a good example of the new LA lilies, with sturdy stems and upright buds.

Care tips

- Choose stems with at least two buds showing strong color. When stems are harvested with only green buds, the blossoms may not open well or have proper flower coloration. Avoid stems with fully opened flowers as the blossoms damage easily during transport.
- Lilies are ethylene sensitive and should be treated with an ethylene inhibitor. Follow label instructions for proper procedures.
- Remove the bottom 1 inch of stem (slant cut) and strip off the lower one half of the foliage. Place in a tepid solution of water and flower food and condition at room temperature for several hours or until desired blossom maturity is reached.
- If you want to speed up the opening of lily blossoms, use a warm flower food solution and cover with a clear plastic bag to maintain high humidity. Bright light (not direct sunlight) also seems to hasten the opening process as well as assure good color in the blossoms.
- Store lilies in a 35°F cooler with 85% humidity. Removing the anthers carefully will prevent pollen from staining clothes or furniture.

Name	Fragrance	Blossom Size	Colors
Asiatic Lilies	None	3” to 3.5”	White, pink, yellow, orange, lavender, rust, several bicolor combinations
Oriental Lilies	Strong	4” to 6”	Pink, white, burgundy, several bicolor combinations
LA Lilies (Longiflorum x Asiatic)	Subtle or none	4” to 6”	Pink, yellow, white, peach, several bicolor combinations
LO Lilies (Longiflorum x Oriental)	Subtle or mild	4” to 6”	White, pink, yellow, several bicolor combinations
OT Lilies (Oriental x Trumpet)	Mild to strong	4” to 6”	Yellow, pink, burgundy, several bicolor combinations