

# fresh

## focus

Prehistoric? Yes. Utterly modern? That too. Nothing gets attention like proteas.

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

Perhaps it makes perfect sense that some of the longest-lived cut flowers in the industry come from one of the oldest plant families on the Earth. The Proteaceae originated 300 million years ago on the supercontinent Gondwana, which included most of the landmasses in today's Southern Hemisphere. Later Gondwana split up into the continents we know today, which is why we find members of the wide-ranging protea family native to regions as far apart as Australia, South America and southern Africa. Southern Africa is home to species in the genus *Protea*, as well as to the related genera *Leucadendron* and *Leucospermum*, *Banksia* species and others in the grevillea branch of the family hail from Australia.

Florists and floral-industry suppliers tend to lump all of these genera together under the common name protea, given to the genus in 1735 by the father of modern taxonomy himself, Carl Linnaeus. Linnaeus was honoring the diversity of flower forms in the genus by naming it after the Greek god Proteus, who could change shape at will.

Most proteas have a vase life of 7 to 14 days, and some varieties may last 21 days with proper care. A common error is to place proteas in a refrigerator that is too cold, says Gwen Tubach of Pro-T-Kae Now, a grower-shipper specializing in African and Australian flowers in Pauma Valley, California. "They're exotics—but not tropicals," says Gwen, so they can be stored in a floral cooler, unlike such tropical flowers as ginger, heliconia, and anthurium. Proteas, however, prefer higher temperatures than roses or other temperate-region flowers.

In July and August, proteas may come from as far away as the lands of their origin in the southern hemisphere, where the seasons are reversed and proteas are at their peak. From September through June, however, most proteas sold in North America were grown in southern California or Hawaii, where the climate and soil most nearly duplicates their natural habitat.

### Old is new

Some striking new varieties have recently emerged: Susara, for example, a hybrid with a fuzzy white center and petals (bracts) edged in dark pink, or Brenda, a striking cherry-colored protea. Others—like the proteas White Owl and Pink Owl, with feathery incurving petals that really do give the flower an owl-like appearance—are too new to be widely available yet.

Any variety of protea remains a novelty, however, for most consumers and for many retailers, Gwen observes. Consumers are generally intrigued; retailers may be wary if they have not worked with proteas before. The large size of many protea flowers, along with their thick (often woody) stems and distinctive shapes, do require a different treatment design-wise.

These same characteristics, however, can make proteas easy to arrange and the ideal solution for certain types of arrangements, like large corporate or hotel designs, that need to last a long time and have an impact from a distance. Because of their complex forms and intriguing texture, proteas often look best when treated with minimal fuss: simply combined, for example, with foliage or accent flowers from Australia or southern Africa, including melaleuca

greens and grays, berzelia, brunia, waxflower, or kangaroo paws.

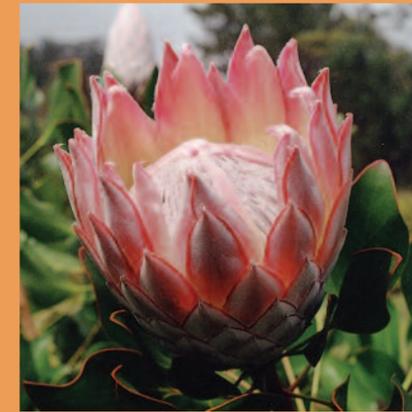
The protea palette tends toward the modern, warm yet muted. Proteas, in fact, offer definitive proof that it's possible to be both old and hip. And there's a statement worth celebrating. 🌿

### Care tips

- Remove 1-2 inches of the stem end and place in a tepid flower-food solution. Let condition in a well-lighted area at room temperature for 1-2 hours.
- Proteas are not tropical flowers, which should never be refrigerated; however, they prefer less-chill temperatures than some other cut flowers. Placing them in a floral refrigerator at 40 degrees F and 85% humidity is ideal.
- To prevent black leaf spots and blackened leaf tips, keep proteas in a well-lighted area (in a lit cooler, for example), always use flower food, and keep them away from high temperatures. Decaying leaves in the buckets may also contribute to the physiological problem of black leaf spots. Some experts recommend using a small amount of bleach in the water.
- All proteas are easily dried by hanging them upside down in a low humidity and low light area. The large flowers may take 3-4 weeks to completely dry.



Photo by Natalie Fitzpatrick



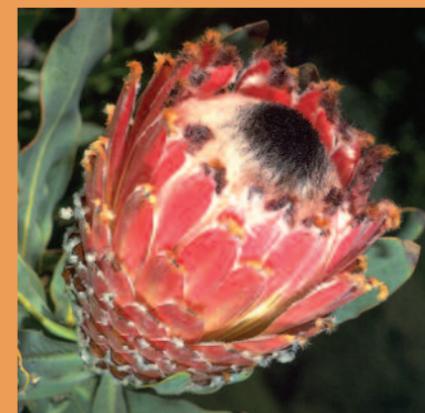
**King protea:** *Protea cynaroides*  
**Comments:** Very large heads, 8 to 12 inches, with soft pink coloring. Leaves are leathery and may be used for pavé or other basing techniques.

Photo by Rodd Halstead



**Leucadendron:** *Leucadendron salignum*  
**Comments:** Resembling colored foliage, these proteas actually have a very small flower surrounded by colorful bracts atop each stem. Stems are 12 to 24 inches long.

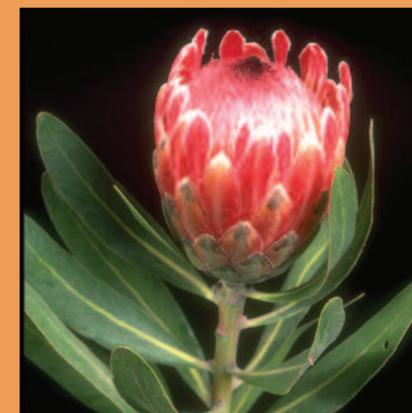
Photo by R. Phillip Bouchard



**Pink Mink:** *Protea neriifolia*

**Comments:** The name "mink" comes from the soft fuzzy coating on the flowers, which are tipped in black. Flowers are 4 to 6 inches long.

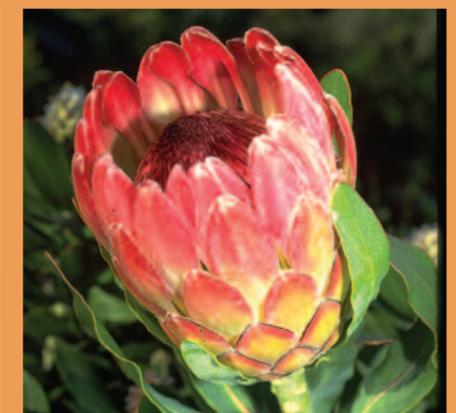
Photo courtesy of California Protea Association



**Pink Ice:** *Protea* hybrid

**Comments:** Similar to Pink Mink and slightly smaller, these flowers have a white sheen to the petals (bracts).

Photo courtesy of California Protea Association



**Sugarbush:** *Protea repens*

**Comments:** A good substitute for Pink Mink in form and size, these flowers lack the black-tipped edges and fuzzy texture.

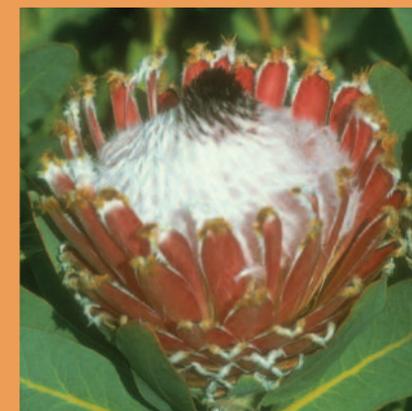
Photo courtesy of California Protea Association



**Banksia:** *Banksia prionotes*, *B. hookeriana*, *B. menziesii*, *B. coccinea*

**Comments:** Several sizes, 6 to 10 inch heads, and a variety of colors (yellow, golden, rust) are available. Leaves have a saw-blade edge and may be used separately from the blossom.

Photo courtesy of California Protea Association



**Queen protea:** *Protea magnifica*

**Comments:** Smaller than the King, these flowers have a high crested black center. They are 6 to 8 inches in diameter.

Photo courtesy of California Protea Association



**Pincushion protea:** *Leucospermum cordifolium*, *L. nutans*

**Comments:** The porcupine appearance of this flower (3 to 5 inches in diameter) is deceptive; the "spikes" are actually very pliable and not harmful.