

Focus On Care And Handling

STABY

Beyond pinching pennies, floral retailers will want to emphasize to store level personnel the value of following basic care and handling procedures. **BY E. SHAUNN ALDERMAN**

Alderman 2011



As summer begins, review outdoor watering schedules to prevent floral inventory loss.

When financially watching the bottom line to prevent shrink and other elements nibbling at floral department profits, where can retailers turn to refresh their knowledge on care and handling? The information age is no longer new, but the expanse of available care and handling info for retailers and consumers can be overwhelming. Nonetheless, retailers cannot afford to ignore valuable tips and suggestions that can save money and help maintain their operations' reputation for offering quality products.

While some chains may rely on vendor-generated care material, others seek downloadable information from the Internet that can be published in store training manuals. Bill Schodowski, national sales development with Delaware Valley Floral Group (DVFG) headquartered in Sewell, NJ, is a long-time industry member with years of wisdom. Schodowski travels extensively to industry events, trade shows and floral happenings where he is often a speaker. Additionally, he manages to distribute a frequent newsletter through e-mail containing helpful information. Care and handling suggestions are consistently included and often requested by his customers and readers.

In a recent Care and Handling offering about roses, Schodowski mentions product quality, temperature control, cleanliness, flower food and proper hydration. He nutshells his suggestions here: "Buy quality. Proper C&H (care and handling) only enhances good quality product. Good C&H does nothing for inferior quality product. Refrigerate. Store product at 34-37° as a rule of thumb. Clean buckets, tables and tools. The most beautiful flowers are negatively affected by dirty buckets, tools, etc. Use flower food correctly. Measure correctly and use the right product for the right use. Change with the times. In the 1980s, the industry advocated warm water hydration as product was cut super tight. Now it's cold water hydration as most product is cut as the breeder recommends." Schowdoski quickly gives credit to industry experts: "In truth....all of my suggestions are things borrowed from the true experts like George Staby [founder of Chain of Life Network, Pioneer, CA.], Terril Nell, [of the University of Florida in Gainesville, FL], Gay Smith [of Chrysal USA in Miami, FL] and my friends at Floralife [in Walterboro, SC]."

Consultant's View

Ted Johnson, owner of budandbranch enterprises, a floral consultancy based in

Media, PA, has worked in the floral industry for more than 25 years. He's been involved on the supplier/importer side as well as retail and mass market organizations. Related to care and handling, Johnson offers his observations: "Where are your stores placing plants and flowers both for display and during unloading/and potting? On store visits, I have seen the incoming pallets of boxed flowers sitting next to the front window, baking in the sun. And what happens if they don't finish the job? The product, now nice and warm, is returned to the cooler for the next staff person or for finishing tomorrow. Ouch!" Johnson reminds retailers, "Temperature is the No. 1 variable of display and subsequent customer vase life. Encourage store personnel to keep as much product as they can in the back cooler while they are cutting and hydrating in the department. Sure it is an extra step, but it is essential to managing shrink. This also is the time to review with staff their watering schedule of outdoor products as you experience those early hot days. Even experienced staff members can forget they now have a few thousand dollars of inventory outside."

Johnson continues, "Review how full stores are filling shelves and especially buckets with product. The temptation is to fill each shelf and bucket full once and for all to save time and

What Do Consumers Want To Know About Care And Handling?

As a former florist and floral industry member for more than 30 years, the Upper Marlboro, MD-based Dottie Harrigan is fanatical about promoting flowers. Self-dubbed as The Flower Godmother, Harrigan believes the common industry goal should be to, "sell more flowers to more people for more reasons — far more often."

Harrigan asserts retailers should strongly consider care and handling when building the floral category through customer loyalty. She says consumers in the United States often lack knowledge and confidence about flowers because they did not grow up in a culture where having flowers in the home is an everyday happening. In her distributed online publication, *Blooms — Living with Flowers Throughout the Year*, Harrigan includes this segment: "Flower lovers always ask how to care for their cut blooms: Can I cut with clippers or do I have to use a knife? Do I really have to cut all the stems under water? Should I put my arrangement in the refrigerator at night? If I don't have flower food, can't I just add sugar, soda, bleach, pennies ... to the vase?" Retailers have most likely heard these same questions for years, but how are they answering them?

Written with whimsy and sincerity, Harrigan continues the section with a list of 12 care and handling suggestions for consumers inviting flowers into their homes. Here are two shortened examples of her "edu-taining" style:

1. **Can I take your wrap?** Generally speaking, the packaging and wrappings that comes with flowers — whether they are shipped raw in a box, picked from a market in bouquets, or designed and from the florist — are meant only to protect the flowers while in transport. Outer wrappings can hold heat and moisture too close to your flowers, causing decay and shortening their vase life.

2. **What can I get you to drink?** Generally speaking, clean clear water — if you wouldn't drink it, don't expect your flowers to — is the most important thing you can give your flowers to make them happy and promote long life."

Harrigan encourages retailers to log on to her www.flowerlovermagic.com site and use the care and handling information in their efforts to educate their floral customers. "My wish for retailers is for them to tap the information I'm offering and put their own spin on it." **pb**

space. However, a bucket's offering filled too tightly sustains damage as the flowers open and take up water. A bucket that is too full also allows more damage as customers lift and return a product to the bucket. The damaged foliage created will be prone to begin to decay in the water, only further accelerating the deterioration of the product."

The floral department can learn merchandising techniques from the produce department, according to Johnson, but he warns stacking plants and flowers is not a good practice because it can promote shrink. He acknowledges proper merchandising as a step in care and handling and wants store personnel to think of presentation in those terms.

California Perspective

Kasey Cronquist, CEO/ambassador of the Santa Barbara-based California Cut Flower Commission (CCFC), says, "The first step to proper care of flowers is purchasing flowers

that are as fresh from the farm as possible and that have followed proper post-harvest and cold chain delivery. California flowers are best positioned to fulfill such quality requirements because they do not have to sit on two tarmacs prior to being trucked to their destination."

For retailers hosting cross-merchandising events promoting California Grown products, the CCFC encourages them to direct consumers to the commission's Web site. "We hold a really strong library of floral products on the site," Cronquist mentions. He says retailers seeking quality as a first step will want to learn seasonality. "Retailers can see when the varieties are growing, who the farmers are and the origin of the floral material." Cronquist believes this type of information educates retailers so they don't just buy flowers based solely on price. "They learn when buying floral material from California that we are logistically able to

"Do not ship through distribution centers (DCs) that have banana ripening rooms because ethylene escapes."

-- George Staby, Ph.D., Chain Life Network

accomplish what's necessary to provide quality. It starts at the farm and our growers strictly adhere to correct post-harvest practices including keeping the cold chain." The CCFC credits the Flower Promotion Organization of Minnetonka, MN, for providing the care and handling information that is published under the Flower Lovers section on the site.

George Staby, Ph.D., founder of Chain of Life Network and co-founder and president of Perishables Research Organization, both based in Pioneer, CA, is officially retired, but continues to organize or lead projects when the floral industry needs his assistance. His first care and handling suggestion for retailers is to "order by variety not just by color." Staby explains, "When produce managers order apples they do not say, 'Ship me 50 boxes of red apples.' Instead, they buy by variety. We seldom do that in floral, but we should." He adds, "You can be sure when Dole and Fresh Express sell those bagged salads, retailers know what types of lettuce are in the mixes. In floral, retailers generally have no clue about flower variety names in mixed bouquets."

Relating to his first suggestion, Staby's second point for retailers is to "be aware of ethylene sensitivity and which flower species/varieties are ethylene sensitive." He could — and has — spoken for an hour on this topic, but believes it cannot be over emphasized to retailers concerned about offering quality floral products while managing their budgets. Strengthening his stance on awareness about ethylene sensitivity and never afraid of controversy, Staby suggests, "Do not ship through distribution centers (DCs) that have banana ripening rooms because ethylene escapes." However, Staby says this practice is okay if an anti-ethylene treatment procedure (such as administering MCP or STS) is a strictly followed routine. Retailers will find the www.chainoflifenet.org site offers information on ethylene sensitivity and in the Floral Crop Specifics section as well as Frequently Asked Questions and Post-harvest and Marketing Library Database. **pb**