



LESSONS FROM SUMMER SCHOOL

> My summer travels had me in eight wholesale houses, 36 growing operations, five bouquet making operations and 18 retail locations. I witnessed some of the most impressive systems for postharvest care and handling: super organized, clean and very sensitive to the importance of temperature management. I also saw some practices and procedures that were, in the words of today's teens, "not so much." And I heard some questions that revealed how much many in our industry still don't understand about care and handling. So, in the spirit of that ubiquitous first school assignment of the year, I'd like to talk not just about what I did on my summer vacation, but what I *learned*.

Orchids are hot — and worth the bother.

Based on what I saw on the shelves, orchids are in the "top 10 hit parade." In fact, according to the USDA's Floriculture Crops Summary, orchids have eclipsed poinsettias as the highest dollar value crop. But orchid buyers don't necessarily know how to take care of them, if the droopy blooms I spied are any indication. And they were displayed without the proper care information for customers. If you want to see repeat purchases of these beauties, take the time to train your sales staff, so they can positively affect sales with professional knowledge

We don't distinguish between potted and cut flower care.

While in my booth at a trade show in June, I showed a range of products, which included plant fertilizer and a pill specially formulated for gerberas. After finishing my rap on each item, a retailer asked for clarification about use of the pills: "You stick them in the root zone of orchids, right?" The light bulb flashed in my head as I realized that many retailers may not understand the fundamental difference between potted plant and cut flower care. Here it is: Cut flower treatments are all about maximizing bloom life, while plant care focuses on feeding, watering and sustaining plant growth.

There's a water crisis.

I'm not talking about a lack of water, here, but a lack of the right kind of watering. This wobbly economy forces us to examine every possible way to save money. Unfortunately, this means flower treatments are sometimes jettisoned for plain water. Will water work? Yes, but since there is nothing in water to control bacteria, it must be changed daily. Of course, every time you place flowers in fresh water, bacteria and other pollutants go crazy, because flowers "bleed" enzymes, carbohydrates and organic substances when cut. Another bacteria source is the dust and soil splash on the outside of stems and leaves — a virtual *Jamba Juice* for bacteria. Commercial treatments run from less than 4 cents to 7.5 cents per ready-to-use quart. Compare that to the cost of water, labor and shrink from excessive handling. Did I mention there are years of research showing that flowers last, on average, three to eight days longer in flower food versus in plain water?

CARE (AND HANDLING) ATTACHED Help customers enjoy their orchids for many months by providing them with care and handling instructions.

We're not protecting our work.

Using sealants and anti-transpirants is yet another smart care step that is too often ignored — but one that, especially with flowers that don't have a source of water, such as corsages and wedding bouquets, helps delicate petal tissues retain moisture longer than untreated blooms. The difference between a sealant, such as Floral Life's Floral Mist, and an antitranspirant, such as Hawaiian Floral Mist, is formulation. Sealants are water-based, wax emulsions. They put a protective shield on blooms to slow loss of water. Anti-transpirants act differently, causing a change at the cellular level to reduce the loss of water. Less is more, when it comes to applying either. With both the sealants and anti-transpirants, it is important to allow materials to dry completely before placing them in the cooler. This action prevents Botrytis problems since the spores require moisture to start germinating. 🌿

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