

## MOMMY GREENEST: GIVE HER HEALTHY PLANTS, OR ELSE

> Since President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday in May as National Mother's Day, honoring mothers with flowers has become as expected as stuffing yourself with pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving. Mother Nature gets in the spirit by supplying myriad spring flowers just in time for the holiday.

Kids of all ages will be looking for economically friendly ways to honor Mom this year, and you can help, by emphasizing the long life of potted flowering plants like hydrangea, bulbs, cyclamen and orchids readily available. Each has selective care and handling requirements while on display in your shop.

### Bright Ideas for Bulbs

Potted bulbs are always popular, especially when you tout their "second life" as transplants in an outdoor garden. It is imperative that bulbs stay cool during display to prolong their shelf life. The ideal display environment is a lighted cooler at 40F. High-light conditions will reduce excessive stem stretching on susceptible species such as freesia, tulips and lilies. Alternative storage is not an option for species with shorter lives, such as crocus, tulips and iris. If cold storage is not available, plants should be sold within two days.

### Bract Facts for Hydrangeas

Use the spectacular colors of hydrangea flowers to lure in window shoppers, then mention their two-to-four week vase life to convince budget seekers to buy. To show them off, be sure at least 75 percent of the bracts are fully colored before selling for optimum interior performance. Bracts will not develop color under low-light conditions. Hydrangeas are very susceptible to drying out and once wilting occurs, pot life is reduced. Always keep soil moist to the touch but take care not to drown them. We strongly recommend using wetting agents to keep the soil moist longer. Hydrangeas like it cool (35-50F) and prefer to be displayed in high-light conditions.



**CAN'T TAKE THE HEAT** The hydrangea on the left was maintained at 65F, while the plant on the right suffered at 75F.

### Clean Living for Cyclamen

The delicate flowers on cyclamen are very attractive and have a long shelf life of three to five weeks if they're not cooped up or stored near harmful gases. Cramp them for five days and you'll discover yellow leaves and an unsellable plant. Work with a supplier who can get the plants to you quickly (no more than five days) and when they do arrive, get them out of the boxes immediately. Plants should have at least four days of open flowers when sold. Cyclamen are ethylene sensitive and flowers will drop and wilt when exposed. Take extra care to keep plants away from truck and car exhaust, cigarette smoke, dead plant debris and ripening fruit. Display cyclamen in cool conditions at high-light levels but not full sun. Bud drop is often caused by low light or too high a temperature. Plants are sensitive to both drying out and overwatering, so keep a close watch on the watering needs. Open flowers bruise easily, so handle with care.

### Don't Kid Yourself about Orchid Care

Potted orchids may not offer the lowest price tag in the shop, but they deliver an impressive gift to hard-to-please mothers (and mothers-in law) and those who just appreciate elegant, exotic beauty. Orchids prefer medium to bright, indirect light. Leaves will burn easily and flowers

will wilt if placed in direct sunlight. Add some tepid water when the soil starts to dry out. Orchids perform best if allowed to almost dry out between waterings. Avoid getting water on leaves as crown rot can occur. If leaves do get wet, dry with a paper towel. Never allow plants to sit in water.

Orchids dislike sudden temperature changes, so maintain an even indoor temperature, ranging between 65 and 75F. Drafts and cold temperatures can cause flower and bud drop. Some orchid species are ethylene sensitive, so keep them clear of it. When cared for properly, flowers can last two months or longer.

Don't end your "care and handling" with the plant — apply it to your display and customer service practices. Display flower meanings on a card or ribbon, allowing the flower's symbolic message to inspire the buyer. Encourage customers to personalize their purchases by leaving a blank note attached to a flower stem where they can write a tribute or add a chore to do for Mom. Flowers and washing dishes for a week may just do the trick to cinch the sale! 🌸

**Ria T. Leonard** is a research associate at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla. and **Terril A. Nell, Ph.D., AAF**, is chair of the department of environmental horticulture. The authors gratefully acknowledge the American Floral Endowment for support of this research.