

Why We Do What We Do

By Gay Smith

YOU'VE SPENT THE LAST TWO DAYS REVIEWING processing techniques with your team: hydration, re-cutting, nutrient solutions, sanitation. Every step of the way, you asked, "Everybody understand?" Nods followed. Off to work they went. Yet, as you observed, you didn't see the urgency given to the processes you outlined. What happened?

Stop and think: Did you explain why the different processes you outlined matter? And not just, "This makes our flowers last longer." Think of it this way: If you scrape your knee, you know you have to clean the scrape before putting a bandage on it, or else you'll have a seeping mess of puss to deal with (please excuse the visual). Likewise, employees need to know why they're doing what they're doing when it comes to processing. Here's a look at the "whys" behind specific processing steps, beyond flower food and hydration.

Why Re-Cut?

You already know that removing foliage below the water line reduces pollution. Those luscious blooms have stems that look clean, but they're loaded with microscopic bacteria and fungi: precisely the reason all flower foods, regardless of the brand, contain ingredients to keep pollution in check. If stems are plugged, they can't take up water very well. Since 85 percent to 90 percent of these stem-plugging air bubbles and bacteria are lodged in the lowest inch of the stem, it's important to cut off at least an inch or more before placing blooms in solution.

Why Sharp Knives?

Sure, you've heard it before, but hear it again: sharp cutters are important. Ragged stems act as bacteria magnets. Stringy tissues expose more surface area for bacteria to attack, and ragged tissues "bleed" more than a clean cut stem. We can't see the sap, enzymes and carbohydrates that "bleed" into the water, but they're there, and they're feeding bacteria.

Why Cold Water?

Use cold water to prep display solutions or set up and chill buckets before flowers arrive. Cold water contains fewer oxygen bubbles, and bacteria develop more slowly in cold conditions. Finally, one of the elements in flower foods is an acidifier. For flower uptake, a pH level around four helps to boost flow into stems and dissolve air bubbles.

Why Sanitize?

Bacteria and Botrytis are the chief culprits with so many flowers, including the ever-popular gerbera. Controlling bacteria is all about working clean: frequently sanitizing tables, tools, display shelves, choppers and buckets. Wiping and sweeping are not enough. That's like rinsing off dishes instead of washing them with detergent. The flowers will essentially eat all that nasty festering bacteria and get "sick."

Believe it or Not

Guard petals are good. If your customers expect roses to be peeled, start retraining them. Avoid peeling unless there are blemished petals or Botrytis that needs to be removed. Peeling results in torn tissues — wounds that provide a perfect avenue of infection for Botrytis spores to enter. Also, peeling loosens the bud structure, making roses open more quickly.

Don't strip too soon. Dry packed roses have jet lag and are thirsty! Removing the majority of foliage before stems have had an overnight drink shortens vase life. Foliage pulls water up the stem so remove only what's below the water level. Also, avoid removing thorns if possible because, often, the bark is scraped and damaged when stems are dethorned. Thorn and bark wounds are another entryway for bacteria and air bubbles.

— G. S.

Why Open Cut-Point?

This one's for anyone who's guilty of asking for credit on roses that were open upon arrival. It used to be that roses were cut off the plant (the "cut-point") when the bloom was as tight as a bullet, otherwise, they'd blow open before or shortly after being shipped. Today, varieties last much longer and actually require open cut points to ensure continued development. Why? Roses gain considerable bud height in the final days of development. As the flower starts to crack open, the plant kicks into high gear to amass a high carbo-load in the bud. It takes a lot of energy for blooms to open. If cut too tight, many flowers will never open more than one-third. Tests conducted in the Netherlands' Aalsmeer auction quality control lab prove that open-cut roses last longer in the vase.

Test it. Place several stems from same shipment, same grower, same variety, but different cut points, in vases with flower food to see which lasts longest.

Why Care?

In the end, it's not about reducing Botrytis or increasing water uptake. It's about getting our customers fired up about flowers. We know flowers are cool. What other purchase delivers such a mega-impact for so little money? But if the customer buys flowers that don't last beyond a few days, they won't be back. And you won't need those employees. 🌹

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