

TOUGH LOVE: HARDY PROTEA NEED TLC TOO

> Proteas are known for their long vase life, but that distinct characteristic isn't a given. The sheer diversity of the Proteaceae family, with its 1,500 different species, demands an approach to care and handling that isn't just one size fits all. While only 160 family members are grown for commercial use, even these come with blooms ranging from 2 to 12 inches in diameter and in colors that would put a primary-school crayon box to shame.



bug rug 'Pink Mink,' like this one grown by Resendiz Brothers in California, exudes an insect-attracting nectar, so watch out for hitchhikers that may glom on during shipment.

Ironically, one distinct common family trait is often the one most people get wrong. Proteas are not tropicals. Sure, they hail from locales we consider exotic — Hawaii, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand — and have a head-turning striking profile that allow them to hold their own in a dramatic tropical arrangement. But their chemical and biological makeup demand less sweaty climates. Subject proteas to the humidity necessary in tropical coolers, and you'll get black spots on the leaves and a vase life cut in half. Proteas actually have more in common with holly when

it comes to their climate preferences, says Gay Smith, technical manager at Chrysal USA. They should be kept at temperatures of 33 to 35 F, with low condensation.

Protect Your Protea

Now that you know to avoid the sauna treatment, what else can you do to squeeze every bit of beauty into the two to three weeks protea can live? Start by shopping smart and finding a shipper who knows the difference between a hardy plant and an indestructible one, says Ben Gill of California Protea Management.

Just because proteas are tough doesn't mean they can withstand a rough and tumble ride to your shop or wholesaler. Proteas are good travelers if treated well along the way, secured well, watered frequently, given ample light and insulated from extreme heat and cold temperatures.

Once they arrive, open those boxes and inspect each stem to see if black spots are on the leaves, says Kim Jernegan of the Rainbow Protea sales team in Fallbrook, Calif. If you're seeing spots, remove the leaves. It's a natural process usually caused by moisture in the box. If left on, they will blacken the rest of the foliage on the stem.

Don't stop your spot-inspection there. Smith says to be on the lookout for the following:

- Botrytis (usually on the fuzzy or hairy parts of petals or a bind point where the plants were rubber banded) or evidence of any disease.
- Insects on 'Pink Minks', Queens and Kings because they produce a bug-attracting nectar. The bugs are inactive when cold, but start moving once warmed up.
- Too-soft tips on the foliage, a sign they were cut too soon.
- Broken heads from mechanical damage.
- Consistent stem length and straightness, as really short stems get stuck in the mix and won't sell as well.

Prep Your Protea

Once they've passed muster, cut a half inch to three-quarter inch off the stem at a sharp angle and remove any leaves that would rest below the water line, Jernegan says. Using clippers or a knife helps prevent stripping the stems of bark.

Place your protea in a clean bucket or vase with a small amount of bleach in the water. Jernegan swears by straight clean water but Smith recommends full-sugar flower food for both wholesale and retail handling to satisfy this family's sugar-loving properties and to stave off foliage blackening, especially for flowers grown outside the U.S.

Smith says the bleach (one teaspoon per gallon) is effective in fighting bacteria, a necessary weapon since field-grown protea come with lots of dust and dirt on the stems that muck up the water fast. Another option is a slow-release chlorine pill, active up to three days compared to hours of bleach power.

Check the water level after a few hours or at least the next day, as proteas, with their large and complex heads, drink heavily when re-hydrating, Jernegan says. Because of the heavier head, buckets will tip over if the water level gets too low. The water should be replaced every three to four days for best results.

Keep them in a well-lit area for 60 to 90 minutes before putting back into the cooler, Gill advises, as dark environs often lead right to dark spots on the leaves. Once in the cooler, give proteas top-shelf placement to maximize proximity to the light and minimize blackening.

This diverse family can be a welcome addition to yours if you make them feel at home — with the right lighting, hydration and humidity in your decidedly un-tropical paradise of a cooler. Treat them right and they'll return the favor by becoming the perfect houseguest to customers, low in maintenance and high in entertainment value.

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