

Illinois State Florists' Association



BULLETIN

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G. M. Fosler, Editor

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Beefs Aplenty About the Quality of Flowers Shipped to Retailers

G. M. Fosler

Although the wailing and gnashing of teeth by retailers concerning the quality of flowers sold/shipped/delivered to them by wholesale houses and wholesale growers has been going on for decades, the furor continues unabated at this point.

This is disappointing, especially in view of long-term efforts by SAF and a host of other industry groups to institute grades and standards and the Chain of Life program—the development of highly effective floral “preservatives” and improved shipping methods—educational efforts at all levels—the availability of research information & “how-to-do-it” publications—and a growing

awareness of the necessity to provide consumers with the best possible quality in both cut flowers and pot plants.

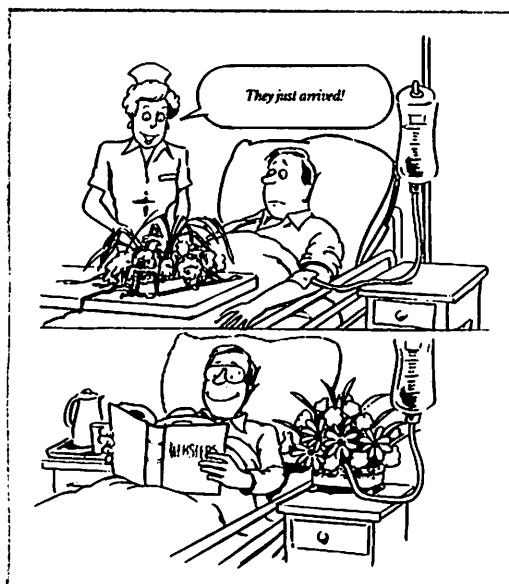
It becomes painfully clear that retailers who do business at some distance from wholesale outlets and are generally unable to visit the market in person are the ones who are really behind the 8-ball. Their phone purchases arrive sight unseen, and it isn't possible to return unsatisfactory shipments and pick up much needed items for an important order on short notice.

Simply listening to some of the gripes from retailers won't do a lot of good, in all probability. Nevertheless, where there's smoke there's bound to be fire. And this “fire” needs to be extinguished through continuing and concerted efforts by the entire team—growers, shippers, wholesalers and retailers—to get on the ball and to do a better job of maintaining flower quality along the entire production/marketing chain.

A random group of retailers from Illinois and surrounding states has volunteered to express, in brief fashion, some of their observations and complaints about the kinds of stock they've been receiving from various wholesale outlets in our area. All contributions are “for real”—not just the figment of someone's imagination. For what they are worth, here are several samples:

RETAILER A: “Ironically, when business is slowest, flower quality is best. We've complained & do send things back to our wholesaler if the quality isn't there, so they've done their best to see that we get quality the

(continued on page 4)



AFMC RESEARCH FINDING NO. 6: Consumers feel their floral purchases aren't always as fresh as they should be.

In Our Next Issue....

You will be pleased to learn that the long awaited and very timely treatise, “A Guide for the Postharvest Handling of Fresh Flowers to Extend Their Useful Life” by Nanette Tippet Meo and Dr. Barry A. Eisenberg, will be published in the I.S.F.A. Bulletin, beginning with our next issue (No. 428, November-December 1986). Tentatively, the manuscript is to be divided into three segments, with the second and last installments appearing in the January-February and March-April, 1987, issues.

BEEFS APLENTY FROM RETAILERS

(continued from page 1)

first time. We're close to wholesalers, so have an advantage in that way.

"Usually, when you are expecting something for a wedding or special order, the flowers will not be at their best. The holiday seasons are the worst. In boxed poms for spring there will be lots of bronze, & for the Christmas season there will never be many whites. I'd think the growers could gauge the color schedule somewhat by what wire services set up for their specials a year ahead.

"Many of the carnations coming from S.A. have a disease, or are held too long before the florist receives them. Much the same with poms; the daisies are even looking wilted & droopy. Much of this happens at holiday seasons. We now have a good supplier & their flowers have been in good shape. We're still looking for a good supplier of roses; many have come in short for regular roses, & have very poor color."

RETAILER B: "Flowers sent by wholesalers are always heavy on whites, especially at holiday time. Flowers seem to be packed too early & refrigerated too long, again especially at holiday time. And there is no grading of roses. Wholesalers substitute before asking if it's OK with you, & they don't let you know if they don't have a product when you need it badly. It certainly would help their credibility if they'd be more thoughtful. I'm inclined to think that all cut flower salesmen at the wholesale level are liars."

RETAILER C: "As a florist who is located quite a number of miles away from the wholesale market & must have our flowers shipped, I feel that at holiday time we always get the highest priced stock—plus a sizable freight bill. And since the seller in most cases doesn't fill the order, the person who does fill it doesn't seem to know flower quality, or doesn't care. Furthermore, our holiday flowers are often either not handled properly, are old & of poor quality, or are leftovers that the local florists didn't take. If boxes were dated by the grower with an 'honest date,' the situation might be improved."

RETAILER D: "We find no grading in the flowers we receive. We get assorted sizes in every bunch of roses, carnations, fuji mums & many other types of flowers. Also, the quality of flowers has sometimes dropped to zero & the same with the emerald. The emerald is usually about 50% usable.

"The carnations we get in are so tight they fail to open & are very poor quality. It seems to me, from the packing & the quality of the flowers, that people who work in the wholesale houses could use some training sessions on how to pack & how to tell fresh flowers from old ones.

"They (wholesalers) make it very difficult for the retail florist to operate & come out with a small profit."

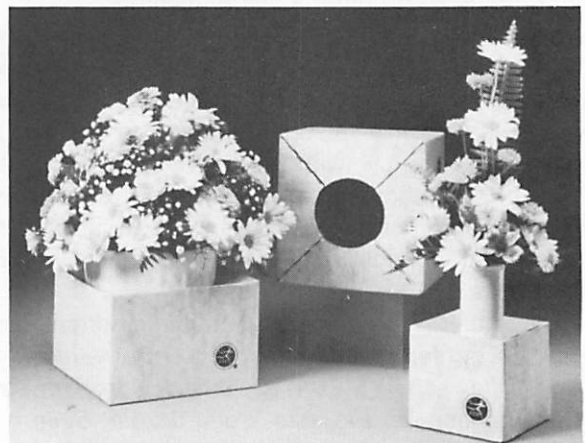
RETAILER E: "Being fairly close to the market, our greatest problem with receiving poor quality flowers from wholesalers, particularly at holiday time, is the loss of valuable time in going over invoices, checking through materials to be rejected, calling the wholesaler back to insist on replacement or credit, & then setting aside merchandise to be held & then returned. Valuable time is also lost in holding off on the filling of orders with unsatisfactory merchandise until good working stock is sent to us.

"We are fortunate to be able to choose from among several wholesalers who ship to us. I really feel sorry for the florist who gets boxes of flowers from a far-away wholesaler & has to wait days for replacement, if it is available.

"We just can't lower the standards of the industry by sending out inferior quality on the retail level, & we must demand quality from our wholesalers."

RETAILER F: "I think something should be done about the condition the cut flowers arrive in our stores on holidays. Last Mother's Day had to be the worst. Of course, the wholesalers say they will give you credit for the bad ones, but who wants credit next week or next month—we want good flowers when we need them. Our customers just don't understand why we don't have the best quality. The blame has to be on someone—grower, wholesaler, or someone in between. Maybe they aren't graded properly or maybe they are stored too long so they'll have more quantity on the holiday. Most of us would rather pay a little more & be guaranteed excellent quality."

RETAILER G: "Our greatest problem develops with our holiday purchases. Two different situations arise at the holidays to reduce our chances of maximizing pro-



FTD's Special Services Marketplace has introduced exclusive delivery aids called Snug-Ease Boxes. The specially designed boxes hold floral deliveries safe & snug while being transported to their final destination. Constructed of heavy-gauge cardboard, the bottom & sides of the boxes firmly support deliveries while the flexible tops hold containers securely in place. They are easy to assemble & to use—florists simply pop the boxes into shape with a twist of the wrist. Snug-Ease Boxes come in 3 different sizes, 2 colors, & all are imprinted with the FTD logo.

fits to carry us through the slower business periods of summer.

"First, since we prebook our holiday orders & usually purchase in box lots, we are frequently disappointed to find some of our purchases have been harvested several days before the product is fully developed, or the product is over-developed & has been refrigerated too long & is not now in condition to last the consumer for the maximum expected life.

"The second situation arises when, in an attempt to cover the orders which the above merchandise was purchased for, we call all our suppliers for 'fill in' merchandise. Ultimately, one of the suppliers will agree to send a box of merchandise, usually at a price figure between the low & high ends of the market. Often we are told there is no 'select' grade merchandise available, but the fancy grade is 'comparable to select' merchandise.

"When the fill-in material arrives—usually the morning of the holiday delivery—the flowers are under-developed & the grades are certainly on the lower end of the scale.

"During the regular business year, we have enough suppliers calling regularly enough that we can return bad merchandise for credit. In addition, retailer florists are then the prime customers for the wholesaler & he is eager to please. It is not, however, always clear how, or if, our wholesale supplier has credited us for the poor quality product."

RETAILER H: "Boxes of flowers are generally held far too long dry, & upon opening them, you can feel the heat come off the flowers. Roses are generally too open or too tight! Many flowers in box or bulk purchases are often poorly handled & have a very high breakage factor—oftentimes they look like they've been stood on their heads.

"Some of our wholesalers do not properly condition flowers when putting them in water, which makes our work counterproductive. During severe weather, box freeze is a problem, especially with flowers that are left set on pallets on the airfield.

"In the Chicagoland area, we are fortunate to be able to see most of our flowers before purchase because of our proximity to wholesalers. This cuts down on our percentage of actual poor flower purchases. But I pass up many, many boxes & pails of flowers at the market."

Let's Hear from YOU

Now that some of our area retailers have had a chance to blow off steam, it is only fair that we give our wholesaler and wholesale grower friends a chance for rebuttal. There are always at least two sides to every story, and this one is no exception. Let's hope, then, that we receive, and can present in print, all aspects of this continuing problem in our industry. Contributors' identification will be kept confidential—unless, of course, you prefer to have your name included with any letter that is published. Send to: *I.S.F.A. Editor G. M.*

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Checklist for Postharvest Handling

Based on a talk by
Dr. Michael S. Reid

Have you recently reviewed your situation on handling flowers and potted plants? Here are some important factors to evaluate:

1. **GROWTH** — Are you doing everything possible (water, fertilizer, temperature, etc.) to grow the best and strongest product for transport?
2. **MATURITY** — Are you harvesting (or preparing for market) your product at that "perfect" stage, *not* "too green" or *not* "too ripe"?
3. **DISEASE AND PESTS** — Are you doing all that you can to control diseases, insects, mites, snails, weeds, nematodes, etc. during the production stage? Putting injured or diseased products into sleeves and containers for transport is like asking for failure!
4. **PACKAGING** — Are your materials and containers adequate for the job or did you buy cheap stuff to save a buck? Packaging should protect the product, fit the transport situation, allow proper ventilation and maintain product temperature.
5. **TEMPERATURE** — Were they cooked, frozen, wilted or rotten when your products arrived at your buyer's door? The best quality products can be ruined if proper temperature is not maintained—all the way from harvest to consumer.
6. **LOADING** of boxes in temperature-controlled trucks. If not loaded properly, product does not receive cool air or is crushed in transit. Vibration, weak wet boxes, freezing or overheating are common problems on trucks—problems that can be avoided.
7. **ETHYLENE** is a gas produced naturally by many floral products. It is a good chemical for ripening fruit and setting flowers on bromeliads, but a very damaging chemical on other products, especially on carnations, snapdragons, and many kinds of blooming potted plants. A spray of "STS" (silver thiosulfate) after harvest or before packaging, plus proper temperature management, will eliminate ethylene injury.
8. **FINALLY**, if you have evaluated these factors once, do it again! If you doubt any of these points, you need to be properly educated.

This article is from "Flower Growing & Marketing," August 1986, issued by Seward T. Besemer of the San Diego County (CA) Cooperative Extension Service.