

Buying Direct is Better — Or is It?

By Gay Smith

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THE SENSE OF PRIDE, haughtiness almost, people have when they tell you *they buy direct* (often referring to rose purchases). Is such pride justified? Does buying direct imply better quality? Superior handling? Let's explore that presumption and others made about the care and handling of flowers purchased "direct."

Is quality better if I buy direct? The answer isn't cut and dry. Proper temperature management at every step of the distribution channel will maximize vase performance. Always ask the farm, importer, broker or wholesaler how they stay on top of temperature management. All flowers, including protea, should be shipped and stored between 34°F and 38°F to reduce stress and minimize transpiration (between 55°F and 60°F for tropical flowers, including ginger, heliconias, anthuriums and orchids). For a modest fee, it's possible to have a temperature recorder packed with your flowers.

However militant the grower and subsequent handlers are about temperature management, if they harvest flowers in tap water and dirty buckets, stems get mucked up fast with bacteria. Remember, the clock starts ticking at harvest. Handling practices only maximize the inherent genetic vase life potential. (Think of butterflies — they have a life span of two weeks, yet a lot of variables come into play that can shorten that span.)

Does buying direct mean I get timely, relevant information about farm level issues? Just because you think your salesperson is at the farm level, doesn't necessarily make it so. Quito and Bogota are as close to farms in Colombia and Ecuador as Key West is to Miami or Carpinteria is to San Diego. Even if your salesperson has an office on farm property, it doesn't mean he or she ever walks into the grading room or strolls the greenhouses.

Does buying direct mean I get first dibs on the product? Most farms selling direct to U.S. retailers are also selling direct to customers in other countries. Naturally, this impacts how well (or not) your orders are filled. Ever notice how sometimes, especially during holidays, your desired varieties dry up overnight due to vague weather conditions? No one

Key Questions

Whether you procure directly from the farm, a wholesaler or broker, here are a few good questions to ask before purchasing. (You'll want to hear "yes" to each of these!):

- Are flowers processed in hydration and flower food solution?
- Are roses harvested according to optimum cut points for each variety (to maximize bloom opening)?
- Do growers treat ethylene sensitive flowers after harvest with the appropriate ethylene inhibitor for the cultivar?
- Are steps taken to keep summer flowers from drooping prematurely?
- Are proportioners used to ensure solutions are properly mixed?
- Do you get (and keep) flowers in a cool environment after harvesting?
- Are cooler temperatures kept between 34°F and 38°F?
- Are buckets and tools sanitized after each use?

— G. S.

likes to admit it, but sometimes products are allocated to the customer paying the highest price.

If I buy direct, does it mean my product won't be rotated?

Product purchased direct is thought to be "fresher" because it's shipped directly after harvest rather than going through a period of sales rotation either in Miami or California. The reality is that rotation happens when you are working with perishable products — at the farm, importer, broker and wholesaler level. Successful product rotation requires good handling techniques. Rotation is fine, as long as the supplier pays strict attention to temperature management, treatment solutions and cleanliness.

Remember, regardless of who you buy from, the buck doesn't stop there. You must continue best practices when the flowers arrive to your store by getting those blooms in correctly mixed solution fast. The formula for winning flowers (the kind consumers buy and buy again) is three-pronged: aesthetic beauty (inherent), quality (freshness) and vase life (maximized with best practices). Happy consumers buy more flowers and, even more importantly, tell their friends how great flowers are to have and give! 🌸

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Info To Go

Economical to Buy Direct?

Economics likewise play into the decision of whether to buy direct. For some insight, click on the Info to Go logo on SAF's member Web site, www.safnow.org. Or get it via Fast Fax by calling (888) 723-2000 and requesting document #697.