

Care Tips for the New Year

By Gay Smith

DURING A POST-HARVEST WORKSHOP last spring, Michael Reid, Ph.D., of the University of California-Davis, posed a provocative question about the state of U.S. floral consumption, asking, "Is there a future for cut flowers?" In response, Reid referred to numerous studies that show low customer satisfaction is the result of poor vase life and lack of freshness, a correlation that begs another question: Are your customers suffering from the same dissatisfaction? Don't wait to find out. In 2007, vow to improve flower quality and customer satisfaction. Here are some ideas that are guaranteed to improve the longevity of your blooms without adding unnecessary costs.

Buy from vendors whom you trust. The floral business is about relationships. It makes sense to purchase from vendors you know. For thrill-seekers tempted by the latest sales pitch, never forget: If it seems too good to be true, it probably is!

Talk up temperature control. You don't need an advanced degree to know that temperature is the No. 1 factor affecting flower quality, but having someone with a doctorate on your side might help you motivate other industry members to do the right thing. Last year, Reid and George Staby, Ph.D., of Perishables Research Organization, published research detailing the consequences of poor temperature management on flowers. These post-harvest experts continue to challenge the industry to take responsibility for delivering quality products. Flower longevity is directly linked to the rate of respiration, and respiration is directly linked to temperature. The higher the temperature, the faster flowers respire, thereby reducing vase life. (Find out more at www.chainoflifeflowers.org.)

Avoid ethylene exposure. Ethylene, the odorless, colorless gas is a flower killer in minute amounts. Best defense? Buy STS-treated products and avoid ethylene exposure.

Ethylene damage is contingent on flower age, length of exposure time and temperature. Bud and leaf abscission (disconnection from the stem), distorted bloom opening and "bluing" are classic symptoms of ethylene damage. Sources of ethylene include cigarette smoke, combustion engines, space heaters, car exhaust and rotting green trash along with some fruits, vegetables and even flowers.

Keep an eye on quality. My rose mentor and friend, John Dolan of Dolan International taught me an important lesson in breeding: "You can't make chicken soup out of chicken poop." Remember, handling techniques and solutions will not make a bad flower better. Do yourself a favor and start with high-quality varieties.

Use the right solution for the right job. When most flowers



TEMPERATURE CHECK Research shows temperature is the No. 1 factor affecting flower quality.

are dry for more than three days, they benefit from two-step processing: hydration solution for at least four hours, followed a flower-food solution. Of course, there are exceptions.

Gerberas and daffodils last longest in water treated with slow-release chlorine pills (not sugar). Protea varieties and tuberose need high sugar (consumer flower food) and bulbous flowers need hormones (ask your supplier for bulb display food).

Tropical flowers such as anthurium and hanging heliconias, and all tropical foliage, are happier in hydration solutions than flower foods because sometimes sugar can stimulate leaf or bract yellowing. Dehydration slows when flowers and foliage are sprayed with a floral food spray such as Hawaiian Floral Mist, a cocktail that causes an enzymatic reaction in cells to slow down transpiration, minimizing water loss and improving vase life. Go easy, you only need to spray once every one to two days.

Measure, mix and use resources correctly. Get the dose and measurements right when mixing solutions. Fill your buckets with display flower food (low sugar) and soak foam in full-sugar flower food. On arrival, refill orchid tubes with fresh flower food. Top off vases and display buckets with fresh flower food, not tap water. Avoid dripping on flower heads, which can cause Botrytis. Keep cooler floors clean and dry. Sanitize tools and tables daily.

Take care of foliage. The cells on the underside of foliage (stomata) pull solution into buds. Refrain from stripping any foliage until the flower has hydrated for four hours minimum. If you're determined to strip roses, use the new plastic rose strippers. Yes, they look like soap holders, but they strip without scraping and damaging bark. Remember, Botrytis and air bubbles find their way into stem wounds.

Use resource material. Our industry has a plethora of resource materials. Why recreate the wheel? You don't have to look far for care and handling help: new ideas, product information, flower identification guides, online learning programs, sales tools, design ideas, marketing, sales, accounting and business expertise focused squarely on floral challenges and of course, technical tools to develop your computer skills and operating savvy. Use the resources at hand to breathe fresh air into your business practices in 2007. 🌸

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