

EXTRA-CARE CUTS: HYDRANGEAS, DAHLIAS, CALLAS



> Mouth-watering, but diet-busting. Thrilling, but dangerous. Luxurious, but expensive. Hot, but high maintenance. The good, or at least irresistible, things always come at a cost. Gorgeous flowers are no different. Hydrangeas, dahlias and callas demand as much attention from the florist as they're sure to get from customers.

High-Demand Hydrangeas

Native to Japan and Korea, the plant is a deciduous shrub. The showy parts of the flowers are sepals, not petals, and bloom color is influenced by soil pH. Hydrangeas display a medium level of ethylene sensitivity; so don't let them hang out with smokers, auto exhaust or space heaters. Handle cuts and pots with care, because bruising, bumping and petal damage triggers the internal production of ethylene and predisposes flowers to Botrytis invasion.

Potted plants wilt fast; cuts often arrive looking as if an elephant used them as a cushion en route. Luckily, both cuts and plants are also quick to rehydrate. For cuts, remove all cotton swabbing, cut an inch off the stems and put cut stems immediately into a low-sugar flower food solution, where they should sit outside the cooler for 30 minutes so floret con-

densation can evaporate. Store hydrangeas at 34-38F and keep flower heads dry to avoid Botrytis infection. If you use a finishing mist, allow time for flowers to dry completely before placing designs in the cooler. Give flowers ample time to hydrate fully (overnight) before using in design work. Cut hydrangeas can empty a bucket overnight, so vigilantly top off with a fresh solution, not tap water.

Do Right by Your Dahlias

Originally from Mexico and Colombia, dahlias were introduced to Europe in the 16th Century by the Spanish conquistadors, whose souvenirs also included potatoes, pineapples, corn and chocolate.

Unlike the conquistadors, you should get your dahlias from a local source (or a grower/shipper that treats for ethylene postharvest). Here's why: the blooms must be cut almost fully open, making them super-susceptible to vase life-robbing mechanical damage and ethylene production. Also, dahlias foul the water (and they must be shipped in water) by bleeding carbohydrates, enzymes, or organic materials when cut, creating a bacteria soup, one that consequently won't flow through the stems.

Dahlias are the poster child for oddball handling techniques, such as blanching in hot water or cauterizing stems with flames. These hot-handed techniques compromise stem cells and set the same bacteria soup cycle back in motion. Keep your cool and use a commercial solution with anti-microbial ingredients. Give dahlias a clean cut and remove any discolored stem tissue. Place bunches in clean buckets containing a slow-release chlorine pill or hydrating solution. Allow flowers to harden-off overnight up to three days

in either solution. Then fill vases and containers with a low-sugar flower food for designing. Dahlias do not fare well at cold temperatures for prolonged periods. Hold blooms for up to five days at 38-42F. If you re-cut stems and change the solution every three days, you'll get a 10-day vase life.

Calla and Response

Callas have walked, or strutted, away with countless awards in recent SAF Outstanding Varieties competitions. While large white callas, *Zantedeschia aethiopica*, have been a design staple, their cousins, the colored varieties, have crept into the spotlight over the past 20 years. They've morphed from delicate flowers on short, thin stems to large blooms on long, strong stems.

Fresh callas have a tight spadix (the yellow spike in the middle of the spathe) that shows no pollen. As flowers mature, the spadix pollinates and appears fuzzy. Key to the *Zantedeschia* family's care is to use a clean solution with slow-release chlorine pills or a hydration solution like Chrysal's Professional # 1 or Floralife's Hydraflor. Prevent mechanical damage during processing by making a newspaper roll and shoving it inside the bucket, above solution level. Place stems in the hole of the collar so they harden off upright. This collar keeps stems from sticking out over the edge of the bucket and getting nicked. Store callas at 36-38F for no more than three days, then transfer blooms into flower food solution and store at 50-55F. Wear gloves — calla sap contains oxalic acid crystals, a known skin irritant.

Hydrangeas, callas and dahlias earn their keep by not only their looks, but also their multi-generational charm. I challenge you to name three other flowers that represent old-fashioned, homespun sentimentality and hip, modern trendiness. 🌸

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Winners Circle

See photos of blue ribbon winning callas and hydrangeas from the 2006 and 2007 SAF Outstanding Varieties Competition, at www.safnow.org/photostogo.