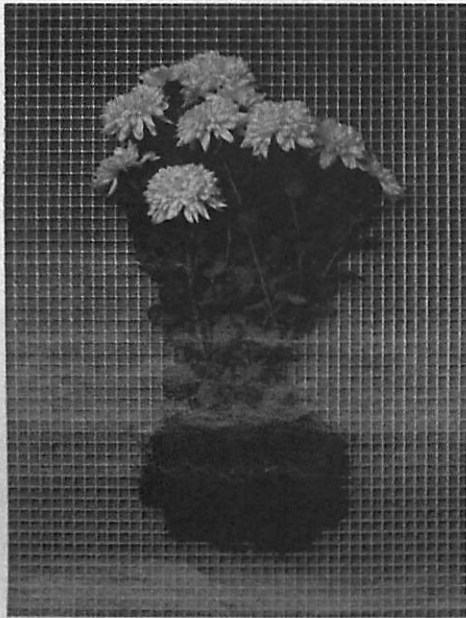


Adams, '84



## Floral Care & Handling

### Is It Still A Problem?

by Charles B. Adams

Fifteen to twenty years ago when floral products were beginning to get their start in supermarkets, the biggest strike against them was poor care and handling in the store. Back then, it wasn't uncommon for a store to buy nothing but three-inch pots, sell them for no more than a quarter, and offer them only on consignment with the grower or supplier. If all that wasn't enough, they displayed them on upturned produce crates, according to


Jim Vosters Sr., president of Vosters Nurseries Inc., in Miami, Fla.

Today, chains which carry a full line of potted plants and cut flowers in addition to offering wedding and funeral services, and delivery are becoming less and less of a rarity. According to some industry persons, the difference between then and now lies in one word—commitment.

As the supermarkets commit to floral departments, they also must commit to maintaining their products after they

reach the stores. Given that care and handling is mandatory from a logistical standpoint—you can't abuse any other product in the store—there is another important reason for it, according to Bonny Downey, director of floral operations for Giant Open Air Markets, Norfolk, Va.

"As we have become more sophisticated in the products and quality, our customers have become more sophisticated. We have become more sophisticated in our care and handling because we want cus-



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tomers to come back," she says.

And this brings up the question of the overall level of care and handling in supermarket floral departments. Is it still the problem it once was? The answer is yes—and no.

"I'm embarrassed by some of the things I see," says Tom Lavagetto, vice president of marketing and sales at XYZ Imports Inc., Dallas, Texas. Lavagetto says he has toured through many supermarkets in the past few months and has seen some care and handling problems. For instance, he has seen poor watering of plants, uncleanliness in cut flower containers and in the department overall, and poor quality products being accepted at delivery.

However, Lavagetto is quick to point out that care and handling has gotten much better over the years. "Care and handling has improved because management has taken an interest in it. The floral department is no longer a stepchild department, it has become one in its own right."

In Voster's opinion, care and handling is still the number one problem in the floral department. "For some reason, they (supermarkets) can train persons to trim lettuce or pick out a bad-looking banana, but

*Commitment and information have helped make care and handling improve.*

they can't train them to fix a bad-looking plant. But, we've come a long way. There's no comparison with 15 to 20 years ago."

Downey believes that care and handling has gotten better over the years, but the problems have become compounded and more intricate with the introduction of cut flowers. "Care and handling is a problem with the newer commodities like fresh flowers because they aren't used to them. Flowers are frightening because they are so perishable," she says.

According to Glen Mueller, horticulture buyer for Dierberg Food Markets, Chesterfield, Mo., "The ones who have care and handling problems are the ones who are not into it 100 percent. We (Dierberg) are deeply into it and now there's no getting out."

Mueller says that Dierberg's stores have fewer problems because their management is committed to the floral department and they operate under a floral manager, not a produce manager. "From the word go we were never under the produce department manager. We are run by a floral manager,"

he says. "I think that a person who is not a professional florist will not handle flowers as well as one who is. We are a retail florist operation, and in our stores, the produce employees are tickled pink that they are not handling any of the floral products."

Lavagetto concurs. "What I see as another big problem (other than care and handling) is not enough qualified people to take care of the floral products. That, and not enough man hours devoted to the products," he says.

Lavagetto says that what is needed is a good buyer or floral manager who knows floral products, recognizes good quality, appreciates a good value for both the customers

and the store, and who knows how to take care of the product.

But not every store has a

"We all know what the problem is. We have to get to the guy at the local produce department. He needs infor-

*As stores have become more sophisticated in their floral departments, so have their customers. This has made care and handling even more important.*

complete, full-service department, and Vosters says that getting information to the produce manager who oversees the floral products is very important.

Even though most persons in

the industry will agree that care and handling is still a problem, it has gotten much better and more sophisticated. And like the chain or procedure that plants or flowers go through from cultivation to presentation at the store, information and care and handling is going through necessary steps.

Floral or produce managers may never know as much about care and handling as the growers would like them to, but at least they are now taking more interest in better care industry-wide.

"Giving the customer a pretty plant was one thing," Downey says, "but giving them one that lives a long time is another." □

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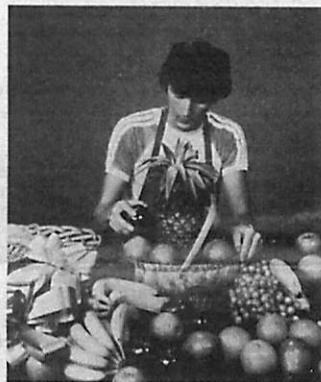
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Mike Flotken has much to smile about.



Flotken's uses similar containers in different sizes with prominent price signs.



Flotken's makes prominent use of their fresh, tree-ripened soft fruit in a banner above the department.

## Flotken's success based on slurpin' fresh fruit

By Susan Stanley

Mike Flotken flips over a heavy pad of green-lined computer read out forms. During the past week, he says, their Flotken's store located in the St. Louis suburb of Olivette, Mo., has again done 34 percent of its weekly business in produce sales.

Maybe it's free cups of coffee waiting for customers as

they enter the department, maybe it's the fact that Frank Romeo, store produce manager, knows an estimated 60 percent of the clientele by name or maybe it's that Flotken's flies in its produce fresh from California a couple of times a week.

Mike, son of owner Frank Flotken, says that he believes it is all of these things and

something that cannot be measured—a concern for the store's customers. Concern reflected in quality, he says.

Flotken's slogan is "slurpin' good fruits." "When somebody eats a peach from our store, they should have a napkin near-by—it's so ripe it will drip," he says. "To get the quality we demand, it has to be flown in."

Flotken's has a buyer stationed in California whose duty is to do nothing but buy peaches, nectarines, berries and other soft fruits and vegetables for the store. Hard items, such as leafy green lettuces, peppers, cucumbers are usually purchased directly from the St. Louis produce market.

"Dad talks to our California buyer at least once a day," he says. Because they can directly communicate with someone who knows the day-to-day condition of the crop, Flotken says the quality of the fruits and vegetables is always exemplary.

"Nothing is too good for a Flotken's customer," he says. "We do a carriage trade. We still have very traditional customers, many women shop here. This might be the only social interaction they have during the day."

On this particular day, customers in the produce department gathered around a display of softball-sized Georgia peaches, picking them from the arrangement as fast as Romeo could get them out of the packing crates.

Flotken credits the now defunct A&P stores with giving them trained produce department employees, both knowledgeable and personable. Their present manager, Romeo, was once with A&P.

Locations have not yet been announced pending final lease arrangements, but Flotken is hopeful that the stores will open within a year to a year and a half.

"They will definitely be upscale," he says. "They will be strictly gourmet. There will be a chef on premises at all times."

"This is really a realization of Dad's dreams," Flotken says. Since all buying operations will be done by Flotken's,

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Flotken's uses a buyer in California to order their just-flown-in soft fruit. For other produce, they use the St. Louis terminal market.

And Flotken's philosophy has worked. During the past two years, two large warehouse stores were constructed in the vicinity of Flotken's. These stores lasted about nine months a piece, he says.

"It was a matter of saturation. We have stayed a little different and it made the difference."

The next frontier for the Flotken family is the opening of four new gourmet stores in the suburban St. Louis area.

they will be able to tailor the various stores to their locations. It is a far cry from the store that Grandfather Flotken started in, he says. A painting of the first store still hangs in the business office. It was a gift from a woman to whom he had extended credit during the Depression.

"It's something we like to keep in mind and transfer onto our customers—the idea of that kind of service," Flotken says. □



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