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STABY - OSU

Florists' association offers suggestions on keeping cut flowers fresher

By Amalie Adler Ascher

"A penny saved is a penny earned." If you're no youngster, that saying has a familiar ring.

And these days, ringing up sales, savings and earnings are matters very much on the minds of florists. Cut flowers are no longer cheaper by the dozen since the metric system went into effect. At wholesale they are now sold in lots of 10. Shipping costs have soared, especially by air, and to make matters worse, too many obituary notices are requesting "Please omit flowers."

Added to these concerns is the practical-minded bride who orders a silk bouquet in place of a fresh one. As inflation gobbles up more and more of the consumer's dollar, florists are taking a hard look at ways to fight back. Their conclusion is this: To stay in business, "retail florists must constantly offer the freshest cut flowers possible."

Research has shown that consumer dissatisfaction is the No. 1 reason for decreased sales and lack of repeat buying. Purchasers are influenced by freshness, color (yellow is now said to lead red in popularity), price, selection, service and quality. But the complaint most often heard is that when the flowers reach home, they don't last.

A 1979 study taken throughout the industry (including growers, wholesal-

ers and retailers), disclosed that of the flowers grown or imported, 20 to 25 percent died before they could be sold. In that year, the industry lost \$138 million in flowers and \$65 million in plants.

Flowers have different life spans. Though preferred by 51 percent of the buying public, roses are among the most short-lived. Moreover, dollar for dollar, they are in the top price range. Compare them, for example, to birds of paradise or anthurium. Though one of these actually costs more than a single rose, it lasts a week or longer, and by itself looks important enough to create an entire arrangement, given the addition of foliage. Even two roses fail to produce a comparable effect.

Carnations are next in popularity, polling 41 percent of the vote. Since they are the most heat sensitive, they are quick to deteriorate. But that's not their only problem. Carnations create a vicious circle. They are highly susceptible to ethylene gas, which derives from such sources as fruits and vegetables (apples in particular), fungi, bacteria and pollution. Not only can flowers die from exposure to this gas, but in the process of dying they give it off as well, in effect contributing to their own demise.

In an arrangement, therefore, carnations, because they are more susceptible to ethylene, endanger the life

of other flowers as they succumb to its effects. A new type of carnation recently introduced on the market and produced in Israel and Colombia, called the spray carnation because it is branching, is said by its growers to have a longer life span.

In last place are chrysanthemums, which are chosen by 5 percent of consumers. Yet, as a group, they hold

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freshness to a high degree, outlasting roses by at least five days. They have other assets. Available year-round, they come in a range of sizes, forms, colors and prices. Pompoms, which carry several branches to a stem, are among the least expensive flowers. The class comprises six major forms—button, daisy, anemone, feathered daisy, starburst and spider. Their colors are lavender, purple, deep red, yellow, bronze, rust and white. More costly are larger Rover, Duchess, dis-buds, football mums and fuji mums, each bearing a large individual head on a single stem. The last named is, in this writer's opinion, the most elegant and graceful, and offers more unusual shades of bronze and lavender, as well as a pale green. You can tell if a chrysanthemum is fresh by the way the stem breaks. If it does not snap easily, the flower is old.

Of the consumers participating in

the study, 4 percent expressed no preference among flowers.

To upgrade the industry, research was begun 10 years ago at Ohio State University under the direction of George L. Stacy, professor of horticulture, to find methods of caring for and handling flowers that would prolong their life. The program, known as "Chain of Life," has been adopted by the Society of American Florists, which started to promote it last year. In encouraging all segments of the industry—growers, wholesalers and retailers—to participate, the society hopes to insure that flowers will receive the same careful treatment at each stage of distribution. Members are entitled to display the logo, which is said to increase business substantially.

Although consumers are looked upon as beneficiaries, they, in effect, become the last link in the chain. As far as possible they should follow the procedures practiced by the professionals.

Last week Darryl D. McEwen, assistant executive vice president of SAF, traveled to Baltimore from the Society's headquarters in Alexandria, Va., to explain the concept to Maryland florists. The meeting was sponsored by the Allied Florists Association of Greater Baltimore.

Temperature is critical to the life of flowers, Mr. McEwen said. Birds of paradise keep best at 43 degrees, carnations at 31 degrees. Carnations

and roses deteriorate three times as fast at 41 degrees as at 30 degrees. Although consumers cannot match such conditions or, in most cases, refrigerate flowers, they can at least keep them away from direct heat from radiators, registers, sunshine and warm drafts, and avoid placing them on top of the television set. It is further suggested that during the night flowers be moved to the coolest spot in the house.

When an arrangement is received as a gift, it should be checked immediately for water, and the level should be monitored throughout the life of the flowers. Oasis or floral foam, the spongy material that holds stems in place, tends to evaporate moisture quickly, especially when a number of stems are absorbing water at the same time.

High humidity helps preserve flowers. The lower the humidity, the more rapidly flowers transpire moisture, hastening the wilting process. To increase humidity in the dry atmosphere of a house, take flowers to the sink every morning and evening and mist them with water.

A preservative also increases longevity. However, Mr. McEwen declines to name a particular brand, suggesting instead that individuals should experiment to find the one best suited to their needs. F. J. Marousky of the U.S. Department of Agriculture calls the use

of a preservative "the single most important procedure... when flowers are held at room temperature."

In preparing cut flowers, sanitation and recutting stems under water are musts. Using clean buckets and containers and removing damaged, diseased and aged plant tissue eliminate or reduce harmful bacteria that shorten the life of flowers. Furthermore, such debris, when allowed to remain in the water, finds its way into stem openings and blocks the passage of moisture.

Recutting stems under water is a ritual the Japanese have practiced for centuries. It is performed in a small bowl from which flowers are transferred to a bucket for holding or directly into an arrangement. When stems are cut in the air, the base becomes sealed with an air bubble that prevents rapid uptake of water.

Mr. McEwen also recommends adding a preservative to the water, and says the more leaves are left on a stem, the longer the flower will last. This may appear to conflict with the usual practice of removing leaves that are under water; but if the water is kept shallow only a few leaves will be submerged, and they can be removed without much loss.

Hammering stems to facilitate water uptake, says Mr. McEwen, is an old wives' tale and should be discontinued.