

HANDLE WITH CARE

By Jean Adamczak

Dr. George Staby may be the most misunderstood person in the floral industry. Basically, his full-time career is devoted to educating industry members about the proper postharvest care and handling of floral products. A self-described family man, he's also a devoted volunteer firefighter (he holds the rank of captain) and an emergency medical technician. His life revolves around three things: family, fighting fires, and the floral industry. Yet some members of the floral industry perceive him as "the enemy." A stubborn, loud-mouthed industry know-it-all with an ego the size of California and a temper to match. The reality is that Staby is one of the industry's prominent experts in the field of care and handling. Sure, being recognized around the world as an authority on postharvest care and handling results in some self-respect, but after 28 years in horticulture, Staby's entitled to a certain amount of

prestige and fame. Besides, under his apparently rough exterior beats the heart of a generous, caring man. Someone who veritably beams with pride relating how he and three industry colleagues founded the Chain of Life educational program. A man whose blue eyes get teary and whose voice gets husky with emotion recalling the death of a 27-year-old fellow firefighter last year.

"I was sitting in my office and my pager went off," Staby recounted. "There was a vehicle accident at Graton Road and Sullivan which is practically at the end of my driveway, so I was there in a minute. There were cars all around and all of a sudden I hear this voice: 'Hey, George!' I look over in a ditch and there's this guy all covered with mud.

"I said, 'Who are you?' and he said, 'Danny.' A fireman in my unit. He was riding his bike, he got hit by the car, and he died. He died an hour later."

Compounding the tragedy of Danny's death was the fact that only two days before, Staby had chewed out the young firefighter at the scene of another accident. Danny hadn't responded quickly enough to Captain Staby's orders and was on the receiving end of Staby's wrath.

"My patience is about that long," Staby said, indicating a space of about one-half inch between his thumb and index finger. "Whoever is with me on a call, they

better know what they're doing. I had so many things on my mind that day. I had people laying all over the place and something wasn't being done right and I screamed at Danny. Later on, he apologized to me and I apologized to him."

Such blow-ups aren't uncommon with Staby and are partially to blame for his "bad boy" image within the industry. Ironically, the reasons some people view the care-and-handling guru in a less-than-friendly light are the same attributes that have enabled him to excel in his field. Attention to detail (he's a stickler for doing things right the first time and has no patience with those who can't measure up to his high standards) and the ability (or disability, sometimes) to see everything analytically are two such traits.

"I've been referred to as having a black-or-white mind," Staby

confessed. "I don't see gray, which is another personality fault or advantage of mine, but when you do research like I do, you have to be analytical."

His aptitude for diagnosing problems and devising solutions is evident whether he's conducting research in the lab or aiding a seriously injured accident victim. In either case, Staby puts his heart and soul into the task and expects those around him to do the same. He

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Dr. George Staby is known and respected around the world for his expertise in the postharvest care and handling of cut flowers.



realizes he's a little "rough around the edges." Essentially, that's just the way Staby is and people can either take him or leave him.

"There's a love/hate relationship between me and the industry," Staby acknowledged. "There are people out there that think I can walk on water, and the other half are ready to shoot me.

"I'm the type of person that if everybody wants to go in one direction, I'll just sort of want to go in the opposite direction," Staby said, trying to explain his notoriety. "I'm a little rough, but I say it the way it is."

SELF-EMPLOYED

THE WAY IT IS NOW, STABY IS HAPPILY SELF-employed as the president of Perishables Research Organization, a research and consulting firm specializing in postharvest storage, handling and marketing of fruit, vegetable, floral and nursery products. Staby co-founded the company in 1983 with Dr. Richard Woodruff. Under the auspices of PRO, Staby

conducts research, tests products and provides information to a number of industry-related companies including growers, wholesalers, retailers, service/supply companies, importers/growers, various industry associations and flowers-by-wire services.

Staby's latest contract is with FTD and involves presenting a number of care-and-handling seminars to association members. The Financial Rewards of Proper Postharvest Flower Care is a half-day seminar and will be conducted in different locales across the country, beginning this spring. Contact the FTD Education Division at (800) 788-9000 for seminar dates, times and locations.

Conducting educational programs on the proper postharvest care and handling of floral products is near and dear to Staby's heart for it's the very subject to which he's devoted his career and the better part of his life. "I've always loved plants, I guess," the 49-year-old remarked. "Except for my father's generation, the Staby family, as far as we know, has always been in agriculture. My brother and I continued that tradition. He

went into forestry and I went into horticulture."

As a youngster in Greenwich, Conn., Staby tended a vegetable garden in his family's yard. His jobs also included cutting neighbors' lawns and caring for their flowers and plants. At 16, he landed "the big one"—a job working as a groundskeeper/gardener/greenhouse operator on the estate of a very wealthy financier. He maintained that job for six years, working at the estate on weekends and during breaks from college classes, until he married Kathy, his wife, when he was 22.

Armed with a bachelor's degree in plant science from the University of Connecticut, Staby and his wife left the East Coast for the Midwest. They lived in Michigan while he completed a master's degree and a doctorate in horticulture from Michigan State University. "That's when I fell in love with the postharvest side of things," Staby explained. He continued to pursue postharvest work while teaching and conducting research at The Ohio State University from 1970 to 1982.

"I had the best job in the world at Ohio State," Staby reflected. "I wouldn't have left a tenured position at the time if I'd known that in



Family, fighting fires and the floral industry are the priorities in George Staby's life. Kathy, his wife of more than 25 years, and Clem, their dog, get cozy with the care-and-handling guru on the front porch of the Staby home.

six months I'd be thinking about self-employment."

But leave he did, moving his wife and two sons across the country to take a job with a company that offered some nice perks and promised to pay three times what Staby was making at OSU. He got the big salary—for a year—and then left the company. During his short time with the company, Staby befriended Woodruff, a co-worker and fellow postharvest specialist, and they decided to go into business together. The result was PRO.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

SINCE WOODRUFF'S RETIREMENT LAST YEAR, Staby has assumed directorship of all PRO activities. He runs the company out of an office and lab facility added to his home two years ago. Home for Staby and his wife is a sprawling, two-story house located on 2.5 acres in Sonoma County about 60 miles north of San Francisco. Vineyards and apple orchards surround the Staby homestead, which boasts 61 fruit trees, 21 grapevines and one very large, old, friendly dog named Clem.

The 528-square-foot lab/office was actually added to Staby's garage. The L-shaped lab is outfitted with sparkling sinks, long Formica countertops, oak cabinets and a few lab tables. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases along one wall hold Staby's immense collection of reference books. White walls and white linoleum flooring add to the clean, professional atmosphere of the laboratory.

Staby's home away from home is his office, located right off the lab. Here things are a bit cozier, with beige carpeting softening the floor, an easy chair for visitors to sit in, and a large window that looks out on the wooded hills behind Staby's house. Soft, incandescent light glows from an unusual lamp perched on his desk. Staby pointed out that the lamp's base is actually a nozzle from a fire hose used to extinguish a blaze at the Greenwich Country Club in Connecticut in the early '60s.

Hanging on the wall next to Staby's desk is a portrait of his father clad in regulation fire department dress uniform. A wooden plaque honoring the younger Staby as "Firefighter of the Year 1991" from the Graton Fire Protection District is displayed on another wall. A computer, modem, printer and fax machine (Staby's office help) sit side-by-side on his desk.

"I've got the largest database in the world on the subjects of care and handling and marketing of flowers," the postharvest specialist proudly noted. His network of colleagues stretches around the world, as does Staby's stellar reputation a postharvest expert. Yet, he no longer feels he's at the top of his field.

"From a technical point of view, I can name half a dozen people that have better capabilities than I," he said truthfully. "My forte, if you will, is being able to



bridge the gap between researchers and the commercial level. I speak both languages. I am able to take university information or research information and make it work at the retail level, the wholesale level, whatever. I am, however, one of the most visible people in this field."

Staby uses this visibility to educate industry members about the proper care and handling of cut flowers.

"There aren't many things we need to do to care for flowers," he asserted. "The KISS principle [Keep It Simple, Stupid] can really work here."

Staby's perception of proper care-and-handling techniques is very basic. According to him, there are only two types of flowers: ethylene sensitive and non-ethylene sensitive. Ethylene-sensitive flowers should be treated one way, all other flowers should be treated the other way. "If we can do that successfully, then we can worry about whether one variety or one cultivar of something needs to be treated in a certain way."

Another basic principle that florists need to get back to in terms of care-and-handling techniques is the use of fresh flower food. "What could be more basic than fresh flower food usage?" Staby asked. "And yet it's not being used correctly or not being used at all. We have data to show that about 55-60 percent of florists use fresh flower foods incorrectly; 10-20 percent use it correctly, and 20-25 percent don't use it at all.

George Staby is very proud of being a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical technician. He also teaches classes in emergency medical training at a community college.

"I can't imagine it!" the care-and-handling expert said, incredulously. "Fresh flower food! Forget about STS and hydration solutions and all those other things. Why florists don't use fresh flower foods and use them correctly just blows my mind. I can't comprehend that."

Staby also has trouble understanding what happened to the Chain of Life program. Initiated in 1976, the

Chain of Life was an international education program to promote the proper care and handling of floral products to commercial floral industry members. Staby was instrumental in founding the concept, name and logo for the program, loosely or-

ganized under the auspices of The Ohio State University. Then Staby and the program's other founders were persuaded to let the Society of American Florists take over the Chain of Life. While the program and the concept behind it initially received a lot of press and attention from industry members, organizations and associated companies, lately the concept has languished somewhat, Staby said.

"Originally, it was the Chain of Life Certification Program," Staby explained. "If you were doing certain things as a wholesaler, retailer, grower, you could be certified to use that logo. Then we came out with another logo which was Chain of Life and the word 'product' was underneath it. If you were the manufacturer of coolers or preservatives or what have you, and if your product did certain things, then you could sell it as a Chain of Life product."

"Unfortunately, the policing of that name and logo got way out of control and the people at SAF decided to go back to just having it be an educational program, the Chain of Life awareness program, which was fine, but they never got a handle on the products that had been using the name and logo. So, today you can pick up an industry magazine like FLORIST and still see ads with the Chain of Life logo on them. So people are still using that as a selling tool but I'm not sure what that means anymore."

Staby hopes someday to revive the Chain of Life program. Since the name and logo are still recognized within the industry, it provides the perfect platform for educating industry members about proper care-and-handling techniques for flowers, and that is this man's passion.

"I want this to go further, whether it's called Chain of Life or what," Staby professed. "I want the practice of care and handling to be much more entrenched in the flower industry than it is at the present time. I don't care if anyone knows about George Staby. But if I can use the people that still know me, if I can use those contacts to springboard awareness in this industry of proper care-and-handling techniques, I won't think



twice about doing that."

He also won't think twice about retiring. "My goal is to never retire," Staby said. "I have no interest in that—I'll die on the job. I'll probably die in the line of a fire someday, but that doesn't worry me. My headstone would say something to the effect, 'Five years too soon.'"

ON CALL

RECENTLY, STABY'S PAGER FOR THE FIRE STATION went off at 3 a.m. It was a "public assist" call, which means somebody has fallen or otherwise been injured and needs help. Staby faithfully responded to the address given and ended up helping an elderly priest who had fallen out of bed. The next day, Staby discovered he'd left a piece of equipment at the priest's residence. When he went back to retrieve the article, he ended up chatting with the priest for about 30 minutes.

"That call turned out to be more rewarding than 20 structure fires," Staby said earnestly. "There are the gory stories, the traumatic rescues, the bloody accidents that people remember. But to me, helping that priest who fell out of bed was just as important and rewarding to me as any of those other calls."

It seems perfectly natural that someone so concerned with helping others and preserving lives would dedicate his full-time career to extending the longevity of a perishable product like cut flowers. Is Staby really the industry's bad boy or is he getting a bad rap from certain industry members? People who know him (and those who care enough to find out), know the answer to that question. Under Staby's confident, sometimes smug exterior is a kind, intelligent, genuinely nice man who would do practically anything to ensure another human being's survival. Handle him with care.

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When he's not testing yet another floral preservative product in the lab, George Staby can often be found in his office, accessing his database or fielding care-and-handling questions from colleagues or industry members.