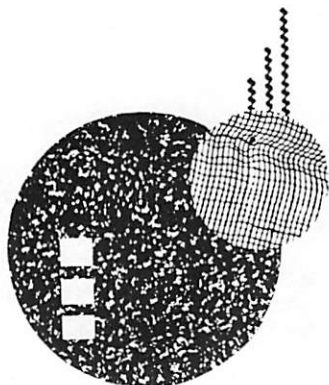


# Harvest dating attempts to curb storage problems

Adamczak 90



**Long-term cold storage is a problematic issue that's plagued the floral industry for years. Now a Florida grower is trying to drum up**

**support for what he thinks may be a solution to this persistent problem.**

by Jean Adamczak

Valentine's Week, one of the busiest holidays for retail florists, is right around the corner. Have you ordered enough flowers to fill customer demand? Will the flowers arrive on time? Will the flowers be fresh?

Unfortunately, some flowers received in North American shops for Valentine's Week and other holidays this year won't be top-quality product. In fact, some fresh cuts will need to be thrown away because their poor quality makes them unacceptable for sale to consumers.

There are people out there selling product that should have been thrown away because it was too old," Leonard Coward, vice president, Burdette Coward & Co., Punta Gorda, Fla., said. "You can take the best flower in the world and if you leave it in the cooler too long what have you got? You've got something

that should be in the garbage can. That's what we keep running into. These people, whoever they are, importers or domestic suppliers, no matter where they're from, are so greedy that when a holiday comes they try to capitalize on it. They'll store product as long as they need to in order to hit the holiday and they're not too concerned with quality of product."

## Harvest dating

Coward, whose company grows a variety of fresh cut flowers and potted plants, decided to tackle the problem of long-term cold storage. He believes harvest dating, or stamping the harvest date of imported and domestic flowers on the outside of the shipping box, would be a feasible solution.

"What I hope to accomplish is the elimination of long-

term cold storage of fresh cut product," Coward explained. "Anybody who's in the flower business has received product at times that obviously was stored so long it should have been thrown away.

"And we're not talking about storing product for a day or two or three, because everyone knows you get product that old. When you get product from California it takes two to four days just to ship it. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about product that, at holidays, is stored for two, three and four weeks at a time and that shouldn't be happening."

In August, the Florida Ornamental Growers' Assn. (FOGA), the National Plant Board and the Florida Plant Industry Technical Council agreed to support Coward's harvest dating proposal. Both Florida organizations filed resolutions with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) calling for the government agency to further investigate the feasibility of harvest dating.

"Cut flowers are considered to be a perishable commodity with, in many cases, a specific shelf life," the resolution to the USDA noted. "It is therefore important that cut flowers be delivered through commercial channels to the consumer as quickly as possible to provide a fresh quality bouquet.

"Because of price fluctuations and specific market demands, in some instances cut flowers, particularly off-shore materials, are being held in cold storage and then being released at a later date and inappropriately marketed as a fresh product. These cold storage materials do not hold up well in flower arrange-

ments and result in a product that deteriorates rapidly on the consumer level.

"This in turn represents a negative image for all parties concerned," the resolution continued. "In many cases, transportation firms are held responsible for delivering a poor quality product when in essence prolonged cold storage is a major part of the problem. A requirement of placing a date of harvest on all boxes of cut flower materials would help provide some quality control concerning this serious problem."

## Unofficial help

When contacted in October about the status of the harvest dating investigation, a spokesman for USDA Plant Protection and Quarantine agreed to comment on the issue anonymously. "An investigation sounds like it's a super-sleuth operation and it isn't that at all," the USDA source said. "I think what we're trying to do is an unofficial determination as to what might be able to be accomplished along the lines of ensuring fresh, quality product. We're not investigating anything. We're trying to find out what opportunities for a solution there may be."

When further pressed, the source admitted that the lack of grades and standards for fresh cut flowers tied the USDA's hands when exploring this matter in an official capacity.

"This [harvest dating] isn't an issue our organization would normally be involved in because we have no requirements having to do with fresh dating of cut flowers," the USDA source explained. "Because we work closely with

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state regulatory officials in Florida, we agreed to see if there was something we could do to assist in this effort. What we've done through our International Services Organization, in which we have people scattered around different parts of the world, is see if there's something that might be done by the shippers to meet the needs of Florida sellers. I don't have any feedback on that yet."

Officially, the only role the USDA plays in the floral industry is that of inspector. "The area we're involved in is specifically to make sure that cut flowers have no pests on them when they come in the country," the USDA source said. "So our requirements are to inspect flowers as well as fruits and vegetables and other things coming into the country to make sure they meet USDA entry requirements. The only rule about flowers is that they be free of pests."

While Coward was aware of the lack of grades and standards in the cut flower industry, he was still hopeful the USDA would somehow be able to help his effort. He hypothesized:

"I think what the USDA people are going to find when they start talking to wholesale florists is that a lot of wholesalers will see harvest dating as a tool that would enable them to buy fresher flowers," Coward opined. "I think, in general, wholesalers concerned about quality are going to support this effort and those strictly looking for the cheapest deal are not going to support it. We'll probably end up with two factions—people who support harvest dating because they want quality prod-

uct and others who don't support it because they're trying to deal in cheap product."

"The disadvantages would obviously be on the part of wholesalers because they're the ones this would impact the most," Connie Riherd, assistant director, Division of

Florist Suppliers of America (WF&FSA) has taken a non-committal stance on harvest dating. The international trade association with more than 1,000 members refused to take sides in the fledgling effort, issuing a "no position" comment on the grounds of

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Plant Industry, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, related. "I'm speaking from what others have told me. I don't have any firsthand knowledge that this [long-term cold storage of fresh product] happens, but some growers feel it is happening and they ultimately get blamed for bad product. I would think that wholesalers might not support it [harvest dating], but I don't know that for a fact."

#### **Lack of support**

The Wholesale Florists &

inconsistency.

"Harvest dating means something, but it will not mean the same thing to everybody and it may not, relatively speaking, have anything to do with quality of product," Phil Tinsley, director of special projects at WF&FSA, said. "You may get a more recent date and the flowers will be in much worse condition than later dated flowers. So the dating itself doesn't mean what people would purport it to mean.

"Who's going to police when the harvest date is stamped on the box? You

could put tomorrow's date on it today. I'm not saying people would do that purposely, but what I'm getting at is the meaning of the date. It won't mean what everybody thinks. It won't mean the same thing to everybody."

Such discrepancies with harvest dating led the California Floral Council (CFC) to take a "no action" position when asked to support the FOGA's resolution to the USDA.

"There are too many holes in it right now for us to give it our approval," Mary Lou Johnson, CFC secretary, said. "We're cut flower growers and we know that sometimes cut flower shipments are not in single species box lots. Would the grower have to identify every stem in a bunch so the consumer would be able to know when the flower was harvested?"

"Who is going to guarantee the date that's stamped on the boxes? When you're getting together a big shipment of flowers, some of them have been picked that day and some maybe the day before and they're all put in the same box and shipped. How would you differentiate which flowers were picked when? Of course, with any new effort like this there are always some bugs that have to be worked out. If the issue gets more attention and comes up before our board again, we'll take another, closer look at it."

Although disappointed, Coward is not surprised at the lack of solid support for harvest dating. "So far, I've had a lot of people say they support the idea, but I haven't seen a lot of confirmation of it," he related. "I don't have a whole lot of letters of support. From the very beginning I

figured retail florists would support this; they'd be affected positively because they could see the harvest date on the box.

"Retail florists could hold their wholesalers to the quality standards they want because wholesalers won't have any excuses as to why product isn't fresh because the harvest date would be stamped on the box. What this would do is make quality wholesalers more visible in comparison to cheaper ones."

### Promoting quality

According to Coward, growers, shippers and wholesalers already practicing the proper care and handling of flowers would become stronger forces in the marketplace. Those in the industry dealing with less-than-fresh product would have to become more quality-conscious or face potential financial ruin.

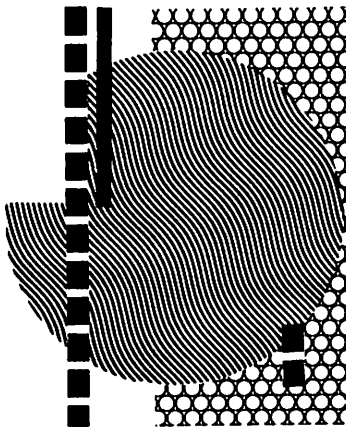
"I think those in the industry who are quality-conscious and are trying to do a good job by selling and delivering fresh product would benefit from harvest dating because they are doing a good job and everyone would realize that," Coward said. "I look at it this way: I'm not ashamed to put the harvest date of my product on the boxes. I'm not ashamed of what I've got and I think it would be a valuable marketing tool for me to be able to show my customers just how fresh my company's product is."

But not everyone feels as strongly about top-quality product as Coward does. "I had two major importers, who I won't name, who are very much against this," he related. "They told me that nobody needed to know how old

their flowers were. One fellow said, 'How in the world are we ever going to get the volume of flowers that we need for holidays if we don't rotate

not fresh, a day or two and they're gone. *That's* what makes consumers shy away from purchasing fresh flowers. Harvest dating would ul-

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stock some?' And that's exactly what I'm trying to fight.

"There are some people who want to spend millions of dollars to promote and advertise and expand the market and that's OK. On the other hand, these same people are not willing to do a little bit less sales volume to get better quality product around the holidays. They'd rather rotate stock and let the person who buys flowers at Valentine's Day get some product that's too old. Poor performance from the flowers consumers receive is not going to make them go back and buy more."

Riherd agreed. "If a consumer buys some roses and they're fresh, they'll last for a good period of time. If they're

timately benefit consumers."

"I'm not saying that harvest dating would solve all the problems of the floral industry because I know it won't," Coward acknowledged. "And I'm not saying that no matter what you do, what rules are imposed, that somebody won't cheat because I know they can. But, if it would eliminate one-half or one-third of the problem of bad product and long-term cold storage, then it would help. It would be better than nothing."

### Not a panacea

"Nothing" may be exactly what will happen to this issue if more support for it isn't generated within the industry.

A cooperative effort is needed to ensure top-quality product at all levels of the distribution chain.

"Harvest dating and long-term cold storage are industry-wide concerns and it shouldn't make any difference whether you're a grower, shipper, wholesaler or retailer," the USDA source said. "Flowers need to put their best petals forward and the only way that can be done is for the industry to try to resolve this issue and that will take a cooperative effort."

"There is concern for this issue within the industry," the USDA source insisted. "But it seems as if everyone is hoping someone else will come up with a magical solution and I'm not sure there is one. It may very well be one of those things there is no perfect answer for."

Hopefully, the informal investigation being conducted by the USDA will shed some light on this issue. Whatever information the USDA compiles will be studied and turned over to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which will decide what to do with the results. Whether the USDA will make a recommendation on how the harvest dating issue should be handled was not known at press time.

(Editor's note: For more information on the harvest dating campaign, contact Leonard Coward at Burdette Coward & Co., Inc., 17160 Burnt Store Rd., Punta Gorda, Fla. 33955; the Florida Ornamental Growers' Assn., P.O. Box 236, Terra Ceia, Fla. 33570; or Roy Vandegrift Jr., chairman, Florida Plant Industry Technical Council, Star Route, P.O. Box 13E, Canal Point, Fla. 33438.) □