

## Powerful Proteas

By Cindy Hoogasian

FEW FLOWERS PACK THE VISUAL PUNCH OF THE protea. These eye-arresting blooms range from 4 to 12 inches in diameter; and vary in texture, from feathery to wiry, and in color, from silver or pink to earth tones. They have such regal cultivar names as King and Queen. Also included in the *Proteaceae* family are banksias, with their bottlebrush or cone-shaped forms in various hues; leucospermum, which resemble pincushions and come in sunset colors; and leucodendron, commonly used as filler flowers in fresh and dried designs. These tropical flowers are native to South Africa and also are found in New Zealand and Hawaii. Members of the *Proteaceae* family are available to retailers year-round.

In addition to making spectacular focal flowers in arrangements, proteas, banksias and leucospermums have long vase lives (20 days or more), making them an excellent value for florists and consumers. While they can be costly, their fresh beauty endures for up to 20 days or more, making them perfect for commercial accounts. When dried, they look wonderful for months. Of course, members of this family are stunning when arranged with other tropical-looking flowers, but they also work with more traditional blooms such as gladioli, roses, lilies and snapdragons. Protea family members are especially effective in contemporary arrangements.

Consider using proteas, banksias or leucospermum in designs intended for hospital patients or as get-well gifts. These long-lasting blooms will convey the best wishes of the sender for many weeks, and they are sure to please the recipient. They also are a great topic of conversation for visitors.

### Processing Pointers

Caring for members of this family is quite simple. When they arrive, cut about 1 inch from the bottom of each woody stem, using a sharp blade or underwater flower cutter. Avoid mashing stems. Pluck any leaves that fall below the water line in the holding container.

Leucodendron and leucospermum may benefit from the use of a hydrating solution, but it is not required for proteas and banksias. Remove any head wraps so the bracts fall free.

After processing, place the freshly cut stems into a properly prepared solution of fresh flower food, which has been dispensed into a disinfected bucket or vase. Members of the *Proteaceae* family are far less temperature-sensitive than their tropical relatives. These blooms can be stored in a

### Foam Fixtures

If arranging proteas, banksias or leucospermum in floral foam, use high-density foam. Consider reinforcing it with chicken wire to support the heavy stems. Once a stem is inserted, do not move it, or the insertion point will become unstable. When transporting arrangements, use extra caution. The packaging must support the weight of the arrangement, and the design must be well balanced so that the heavy blooms do not tip the container.

— C. H.

standard floral cooler without inducing chill injury.

### Leaf Blackening: A Necessary Evil?

Leaf blackening may be alleviated somewhat by holding and displaying the flowers in a well-lighted area, according to [Chainoflifeflowernetwork.org](http://Chainoflifeflowernetwork.org). That resource also suggests using flower food that contains glucose, rather than sucrose, to prevent blackening. If leaves discolor before the blooms are arranged, simply remove them before use in designs. Tell consumers the leaves may be plucked if they become unattractive.

### Hydration Solutions

These can be thirsty blooms, so be certain that there is an adequate supply of flower food in the container at all times. Provide customers with several packets of flower food so they can nourish these blooms for their expected vase life.

### Spread the Word

The Hawaii Tropical Flower Council offers four simple care tips for consumers who purchase proteas, which you can pass on to your customers:

1. Re-cut the stems once (using a sharp blade).
2. Display flowers in clean water, with or without flower food.
3. Keep flowers away from heat sources and drafts.
4. Display near a window when possible. 🌿

**Cindy Hoogasian** is co-author of "In Season," a post-harvest care book. She has been widely published in industry publications and has written numerous articles on the care and handling of flowers from the retail florist's perspective.