Questions from the Field

By W. Kurt Schroeder, AAF, AIFD, PFCI

HERE ARE SOME RECENT QUESTIONS I'VE HEARD from retailers and wholesalers during my travels around the country.

Q: How far ahead can I fill my vases with flower food solution for design production?

A: You should not pre-fill vases with flower food solution and let them sit very long before designing in them and placing the completed arrangements for sale or delivery. The vases can be filled the morning you are producing the designs. This keeps the solution fresh for maximum results.

Q: I have been told to always add a little bleach to the water of my storage buckets. Is this necessary?

A: No, it's not necessary. If you properly process your flowers in a bucket that has been cleaned with a horticultural detergent, use a hydration pre-treatment and a properly-mixed flower food solution, there is no need to add additional ingredients. The effectiveness of bleach dissipates in a few hours. Adding a little bleach won't do any harm, but it's a waste of time and product.

Q: We display our loose cut flowers and pre-made bouquets in galvanized buckets and vases. Will flower food solutions work in metal containers?

A: Most commercial flower foods will work in metal containers. The problem is the potential damage to the container. One of the key components of most commercial flower foods is an acid to lower the pH to an acceptable level. Over time, acids will corrode and damage most metal containers. I suggest using a plastic liner with the galvanized buckets. This eliminates the erosion problem and makes it easy to keep the containers clean.

Q: Is gluing flowers for corsages and special projects damaging to the blooms?

A: Not in my experience. I have used many different types of glues and adhesives on fresh flowers with success. Test the adhesive for holding power and durability in a cooler and high humidity environment before completing a project. I have had great success with a pot melt glue with no ill effects to flowers. Adhesives can be faster, easier and less stressful for the blooms than the additional handling that's required with wiring.

Q: My flower department's fresh product is delivered on a shared truck with fresh produce. Is there any problem with this?

A: Yes. Fresh produce generates ethylene gas that can damage flowers in a short period of time. Flowers should be shipped at 34°F to 38°F and should not be exposed to fresh produce, including fruits and vegetables. Ethylene damage symptoms include yellow foliage, shattered florets and a short vase life.

Q: How much foliage should I remove from flowers before they are processed?

A: Only remove damaged foliage and leaves that will fall below the solution level in the bucket or vase. Leave as much foliage on the stem as possible. Foliage serves two main purposes. First, it helps with the uptake of solution to the flower head (hydration). Second, it is a beautiful and natural filler for your display and design.

Q: How often do I really need to clean my buckets?

A: If you wouldn't drink from the container yourself, your flowers shouldn't either. Clean buckets and containers every time they are used to prevent bacteria, fungi and debris from shortening the shelf and vase life of your flowers. Use a commercial horticulture detergent according to directions. Bleach is not as effective as a horticulture detergent unless you want to "whiten" your buckets. Research has shown that not properly cleaning your buckets can reduce vase life by 20 percent.

Q: I use a commercial flower food that works great but has a cloudy residue in the bottom of the buckets and vases. What is this and is it normal?

A: The cloudy substance you see in the bottom of your containers is very normal for certain brands of commercial flower food and can be very beneficial in the storage of the flowers. The $20 word for the substance is "flocculent." It is probably an aluminum hydroxide precipitant that forms after the flower food is mixed with water. There is nothing to worry about, although you can use a "clear" flower food formula if the cloudy look bothers you.

Q: How full should I fill my flower buckets?

A: I recommend one-third to one-half full, enough to sustain the flowers during the storage period. Some research suggests an increased amount of solution in the bucket can increase the speed of hydration by increasing the pressure to push solution up the stem. More importantly, make sure the bucket is clean and the flower food is measured correctly.

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