

## SAVE THE HOLIDAY

> Florists have so much to consider around Valentine's Day and, just a few months from now, Mother's Day that it's easy to assign a lower priority to routine tasks. But care and handling jobs, no matter how small or mundane, should be a central point of your holiday plans. Whether you're scrambling to catch up for Valentine's Day or planning ahead for Mother's Day, here are three care-related tips to keep your product in picture-perfect shape.

### To Thy Suppliers, Be True

Great flowers start with excellent growers and trusted suppliers. Valentine's success is the tipping point for a solid year, so stay solid. Avoid the urge to switch suppliers in response to fabulous price offers or unbelievable promises.

When it comes to sourcing flowers, origins matter. Roses and carnations from Africa or Europe are different from South American staples (which represent the bulk of U.S. imports). Production in Colombia and Ecuador focuses on hybrid tea roses. African growers focus on more productive, intermediate (smaller) varieties. Cut stage, especially on carnations and minis is much tighter in Europe and Africa than the Americas. Color and vase life from various regions also differs — all the more reason not to test out a new supplier when color is critical and you have no time to lose. I'll never forget jumping at a terrific price for 'Redlion', a red tulip I knew my retail customers would love, only to discover when the boxes arrived on Feb. 10, it was far too orange-y to sell at Valentine's Day. The lesson: If a deal sounds too good to be true — loads of bright red tulips, cheap, in the dead of winter — it likely is.

### Get Your Clean On

Filling a dirty bucket with flower food is like eating caviar off a dirty plate. Around our industry's big holidays, cleanliness is everything. Wash and sanitize all of your main tools, containers and surfaces before holiday product starts flowing in. Sharpen choppers and tools. Deep-clean coolers and arrange for a service call to vacuum compressors, so that you're operating with improved energy efficiency. Wipe down shelves and walls with a commercial cleaner to rid surfaces of lingering Botrytis spores. Sanitize floors and floor drains.



Remove any food and deco mosses, which can be unexpected sources of ethylene. Make room to stack boxes on pallets, about 10 inches away from walls to maximize airflow.

Clean out vases that have been gathering dust (a breeding ground for germs). Wash aprons and sparkle clean the coffee maker in preparation for overtime use. Clean out delivery vehicles, too.

What about sanitizing trash cans? Two years ago, a grower contacted me with a hydrangea problem, saying the fresh flower balls flopped after a day or two, a problem that sounded suspiciously like ethylene exposure. After turning every stone, we found the culprit: a half-eaten mango at the bottom of a trash can in the processing area. That rotting fruit was producing enough ethylene to poison the hydrangeas. (Remember, it takes less than

1 ppm for ethylene to kill flowers, and death from ethylene happens 24 to 48 hours after exposure.) External sources of ethylene gas at your shop may include auto exhaust (sucked into design area as deliveries are being loaded), dirty heat exchangers on space heaters, fruits in the cooler, rotting green bits under design tables or a driver who smokes in vans.

### All Hands on Deck

Your best resource at the holidays, and year-round, is a well-trained staff. Team members who know what to do, and why they're doing it, will save you time and money. Years ago I came upon an employee cutting mini carnations one bunch at a time as he processed 25 boxes. When asked why he didn't unpack 15 bunches and then cut and place all of the flowers in a bucket, he replied that no one had ever shown him that method. That's a training failure.

Communicate best practices. Use technology to provide visuals to your staff. Having trouble getting buckets filled correctly? Whip out your smartphone and take a picture of the perfect fill. Share it with staff. When it comes to matching care products with flowers and plants, you can't beat a straightforward graph or chart. The visual organizer will keep your staff on track and serve as a reminder on a daily or weekly basis. Post information about dosages in a public space; don't forget to account for bucket size variations.

Finally, just as you review sourcing problems or customer complaints immediately after the holidays, take a moment to reflect (and ask for feedback on) any care and handling issues. That way, you'll be better prepared when the next big holiday rolls in. 🌹

**Gay Smith is the technical consulting manager at Chrysal Americas in Miami. [gaysmith@earthlink.net](mailto:gaysmith@earthlink.net)**