

SPECIAL CARE FOR SPECIAL FLOWERS

> Although carnations, chrysanthemums and roses may make up the bulk of your sales, the use of specialty cut flowers has increased over the last decade. Specialty cuts have numerous challenges since many do not tolerate shipping and vase life can be short. But don't let this discourage you as many species and cultivars do well and provide variety for your designs and your customers.

Specialty cut flowers are grown throughout the United States, mostly in fields — not greenhouses — so availability is usually seasonal. Many growers sell their flowers at local farmers' markets and in community sustained agricultural operations, but many ship nationally. For a list of specialty cut flower growers and their species, see the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers' website (www.ascfg.org).

The basic principles of flower care apply to specialty cut flowers. Tools, buckets, vases and work areas must be clean and sterilized, floral solutions freshly made and ethylene exposure avoided. Each species and cultivar has different handling needs, so check directly with your source for tips on proper care and handling. For a comprehensive resource, see "Specialty Cut Flowers" by Allan Armitage and Judy Laushman, or visit the Chain of Life Network website (www.chainoflifenet.org).

Many species cannot be stored and recent research at North Carolina State University has shown that, for some cultivars of certain flowers, including false Queen Anne's Lace, sunflowers, zinnia and yarrow, the use of floral solutions can actually reduce vase life. For flowers that do well in water, change the solution daily, clean the bucket, add clean water and recut stems to reduce bacteria build-up. Below are handling tips for some popular species.

Ageratum: The dense cluster of flowers comes in blue, white or pink with some bi-colors and is available summer through mid-fall. When purchasing, buds should show color and one-third of the flowers should be open. Flowers do not store well, so use immediately upon purchase. You can attain a long vase life using plain water, but roots will form. Therefore, it is recommended to



HEALTHY HABITS Changing water solutions daily and recutting stems leads to a longer life for specialty cut flowers.

use a commercial holding solution (low sugar) or flower food. Vase life averages seven to 12 days but has been found to be up to 20 days for some varieties. The leaves tend to decline before the flower. *Ageratum* flowers dry well, making them ideal for use in dried arrangements.

Campanula (bellflower): Flowers are available year-round depending on cultivar, but are most popular in spring and fall. The bell-shaped flowers come in violet-blue, purple, pink and white and are sensitive to ethylene. Purchase flowers when 30 percent to 50 percent of the flowers are open. Most varieties hold up well in water, but it is recommended to use a commercial holding solution or flower food. Flower life varies depending on variety, lasting from five to 14 days, but leaves will decline quicker than the flowers. *Campanula* stems take up a lot of water, so check frequently and replenish solution often. It is best to keep flowers in solution, as vase life can be reduced drastically when used in floral foam.

Larkspur: A flower closely related to delphiniums, larkspur comes in purple, lavender, lilac, white, and dark and light pink. Flowers are readily available from May through September, but can be obtained year-round. Purchase with three to five open flowers per stem to ensure

adequate opening and watch for broken tips, petal drop and mildew. Like delphinium, larkspur is extremely sensitive to ethylene, causing petals to shatter. Upon arrival, cut stems and place into a hydration solution for two to four hours, then place in flower food. Flowers can be kept at 33 F to 35 F until sold, but keep stems upright and in solution. NEVER store flowers dry. Depending on variety, larkspur should last four to 12 days. Handle with care, as plant parts can cause skin irritations. Larkspur also makes an excellent dried flower.

Whether specialty cuts are used fresh or dry, they add a special dimension to designs and provide customers with something new to choose from. 🌸

Terril A. Nell, Ph.D., AAF, is chair of the department of environmental horticulture, and **Ria T. Leonard** is a research associate at the University of Florida in Gainesville. The authors acknowledge the American Floral Endowment for support of this research.