

Tailor-Made for Tropicals

By Gay Smith

RARELY DOES A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH LEAD to success (when was the last time you wore something in sized-to-fit-all, proudly and in public?). The blanket approach is especially detrimental to flower care.

Consider tropical flowers and the specific, unique processing requirements they demand. Originating in areas with high rainfall and humidity, tropical plants are wired differently than flowers grown in more temperate climates. Tropical blooms take in some moisture from stems but also through the face of the flowers and crooks where blooms and leaves attach to stems. Their stems and petals are waxy — Botrytis spores require water to germinate, so Mother Nature provided these tropical beauties with built-in protection against the climate in which they thrive.

Another consideration is tropical flowers and foliage are generally harvested quite open so they have little need for treatments containing sugar. Remember, sugar supplies bud-opening energy. There are some exceptions, though. For example, always give spray dendrobiums a fresh cut and refill tubes with fresh solution of a low-sugar flower food. Those buds need a push to continue opening. Always ask your vendor if the dendrobiums are treated with a silver thiosulphate solution. When white dendrobiums turn a

Clean and Well-fed

No treatment or solution will make a bad flower better — knowing this is the first step in rethinking your care mentality. But for flowers in good shape at time of cut, the correct use of professional products and clean equipment makes an appreciative difference in overall vase longevity.

Establishing sanitation protocols is painless and makes a huge difference. Everyone understands the importance of a clean bucket, but what about work tables, choppers, knives and display shelves? Those should be sanitized two to three times daily. If you wash buckets with bleach, add a low-suds, biodegradable detergent to the solution. Bleach, good for sanitizing, does not alone get the gunk out of the gouges in buckets. Detergent breaks the surface tension of water so grime and pollutants are routed out.

If you compare flowers treated with floral food compared to those treated in water, pennies or home brews, the difference is 20 percent to 40 percent better with flower foods.

— G.S.

weird chartreuse green, or petals turn wrinkly like crepe paper, you can bet both are symptoms of ethylene damage. Finally, tropical flowers don't like cold temperatures. Many suffer chill damage when the temperature gets colder than 50°F, and it doesn't take more than a few hours exposure for damage to occur. If you see a blueish cast on the blooms, they're likely suffering from too-cold conditions.

Solutions, Solved

It's important to ensure the vase solution remains free of bacteria and fungi pollution so water continues to flow in stems. The best option is a hydration solution. By their very nature, hydration solutions do not contain sugar, but they lower the pH to boost flow, dissolve air bubbles in stems and contain clarifiers to keep pollution in check. Hydration solutions are perfect for ornamental foliage, because a solution with sugar can stimulate leaf yellowing if used as the initial drink. Another processing solution to consider for heliconias is one containing a slow-release chlorine. Again, the chlorine keeps the water clean so flow happens.

Tropical flowers are the only blooms that enjoy a fresh spritz of moisture directly on the flowers. Fill your spritzer with distilled water to avoid any spotting caused by naturally occurring salts in some area tap water. There are finishing sprays available that act to seal the bloom surface, and Hawaiian Floral Mist that causes an enzymatic reaction in cells to slow water loss.

Do any tropical flowers like sugary solutions? Yes, tuberoses have a major sweet tooth. According to research by Michael Reid, Ph.D., loss of buds is avoided and vase life significantly improved when the flowers are treated at grower level for 24 hours in flower food augmented with 20 percent sucrose. If so treated, tuberoses can be stored at 32°F for five days without losing buds. Reid recommends packing tuberoses horizontally to prevent stem bending. According to his research, if growers give a sucrose pulse and florists treat flowers in a full-sugar flower food, the florets will continue to open up the stem.

Protea also live for a sugar rush. Wholesalers and retailers should process the South African species in full-load flower food all the way through the chain. (Full-load flower food is the formula used to soak foam and fill vases.) Low-sugar flower food is used in wet-pack shipping and display buckets. Protea need sugar for longevity and to reduce foliage blackening.

All this talk of tropical flowers, hydration and sweetness makes me thirsty for one of those tropical libations full of fruit and more goodies tailor-made to my preferences. 🌿

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