Tidings of Proper Care

By Gay Smith

UNLESS YOU LIVE IN A CITY such as Phoenix or Miami, the short days of November and December are often dark, wet and cold. Dreary environments are in desperate need of the colors, fragrances and flamboyance that flowers, berries, pine boughs and seed pods provide. But when it comes to processing, these floral items have specific needs.

GO WITH THE FLOW **Autumn berries, like hypericum ('Pinky Flair', from Hyperactive Farms, a 2005 SAF Outstanding Varieties blue ribbon winner) need a steady flow of water up the stems to keep them hydrated.**

Go with the Flow

Question: What do autumn berries such as hypericum, cranberry *viburnum, sumac, privet, calicarpa, symphoricarpos,* rose hips and *montbretia* seed pods have in common? **Answer:** A critical need for good flow up their stems. How do you generate that flow? Sugar is not required but clean water is important, and antimicrobials can keep bacteria in check. I recommend hydrating berries in a sugarless solution, such as Chrysal Professional No. 1 or Floralife Hydroflor.

Grasses and foliages (think cotinus and bupleurum) don't need sugar either. To maximize flow and keep pollution down, use hydration solutions when processing these botanicals, too.

Evils of Ethylene

With the exception of Ilex sold in the Dutch auctions, most twigs bearing fruit (berries) are not treated with an anti-ethylene product like STS (silverthiosulphate), so it is important to keep them apart from ethylene-producing flowers, foliages, fruits and veggies.

Contrary to popular belief, not all Christmas greens produce ethylene. Most research says that Douglas fir, redwood and white pine produce ethylene. Store these three foliages apart from other flowers and foliages.

Eucalyptus, however, will produce huge amounts of ethylene if it gets too warm or is stressed for water. To avoid stress, treat foliages like cut flowers by processing bunches into hydration solutions (without sugar). Store flowers and cut foliage (except tropicals) between 33°F and 38°F to reduce ethylene damage.

Processed to Perfection

As long as we're on evergreens, let's examine good processing methods for other popular red flowers like anthurium and ginger. Anthuriums grow in tropical climates, so blooms suffer when temperatures drop below 50°F. Chill damage is obvious because the spathe turns blue or brown. Gingers are even more sensitive. They suffer chill damage when temperatures are below 55°F.

The most effective processing solution for both tropical blooms is slow-release chlorine solution — the same products recommended for daffodils. Remember, slow-release chlorine is different from the chlorine used in common household bleach, which loses its active power after a few hours — even if it still smells potent. Slow-release pills, on the other hand, are active for up to five days.

Poinsettia Pointers

Finally, let's talk cut poinsettias. Have you ever stuck a broken bract in an arrangement only to have it droop and fail by the next day? The Euphorbia family, including poinsettias, 'Snow on the Mountain' and varieties bred for gardens, is unique because stems bleed latex when cut. Latex is an active breeding ground for bacteria; therefore, the best solution for cut poinsettia processing is one without sugar but with antimicrobial ingredients — both hydration and chlorine-based solutions fit this profile. Solutions based on chlorine are all about microbial control. Hydration solutions offer additional attributes (lowering the pH) to help boost flow and dissolve air bubbles in water.

The bottom line is that flowers bleed when cut. Enzymes, carbohydrates, mucilage and latex are all perfect environments for bacterial explosions. Of course, bacteria also thrive on sugar, so make sure your solution starts clean and remains clean the entire time flowers are drinking it.

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Editor's Note: *Check out some new twists on traditional Christmas greens in this month's Fresh Choices column on p. 16.*