

Tool Time

By Gay Smith

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO HANDLE FLORAL MATERIAL correctly without various tools of the trade. Keeping tools clean, sharp and in good condition not only makes good business sense, it also is an important detail in providing customers top quality flowers. This month, I'll detail some of my best tips for some of your shop's most common tools.

The Knife Life

The most common knife used in a flower shop is a simple, single blade pocket knife. These knives are used for myriad tasks — from cutting foam to removing a rose thorn jammed under a fingernail or cutting cheese chunks for a well-deserved break during long hours at holidays. Primarily, of course, these knives help us construct floral designs.

It's important to **sanitize knives daily**. Prepare a dip jar with floral cleaner for each design table and tell designers to dip their blades several times a day. If you use a floral-friendly cleaner, don't rinse the blade, just dip and go. **Change these solutions at least once a week**. Remember, blades, cutters and shears need to be sanitized, too. Dip shears regularly in floral cleaner and spritz chopper blades with the same solution you use to sanitize work tables.

Nothing disappears faster in a design room than knives, cutters and shears, but avoid the temptation to grab ribbon or paper scissors to cut stems in a pinch. The by-pass action of scissors crimps stem tissues together, rather than providing a clean surface for free flow. **Never use wire cutters to snip flower stems**, no matter how desperate you are because they will crimp the cells in the stem together rather than leaving a clean, open surface for the free flow of solution. **Metal thorn removers also are problematic** because they scrape away stem bark when stripping, facilitating entry of bacteria and Botrytis. Instead, try the new plastic strippers, the ones that look like soap dishes. They are soft enough to strip alstroemeria and strong enough for lilies; plus, they're

A Final Word

Using the correct tool for the job is as important as making sure tools are clean and sharp. When you cut stems with knives, flower shears or chopper blades, you remove the outermost layer of callous tissue so stems can drink efficiently. It's important to cut at least 1 inch to 2 inches from stems, because that's where 95 percent of the bacteria and gunk lodge. It makes no sense to place a flower stem in solution if the stem end is calloused and polluted.

— G. S.

easy to sanitize. Finally, **keep blades sharp**. When tools are dull, the cut is often ragged, resulting in dangling strings of green tissue, which can pollute water.

Bacteria-Free Buckets and Vases

Bucket cleaning is nobody's favorite job, but it's important to make it a part of your daily sanitation procedures. **Sanitize buckets every time they are emptied; never put fresh flowers in a dirty bucket**. Efficient scrubbing requires a brush with firm bristles and a floral-friendly detergent solution to remove bacteria, fungi, yeasts and other pollutants.

Periodically, check the condition of buckets and display vases and **consider replacing any that are deeply scratched or etched**. Those scratches are perfect hiding places for pollutants and make it tough to properly clean surfaces.

When you clean your containers, scrub them inside and out. **Don't stack them until they are dry**. A bleach rinse is fine, but **bleach alone is not adequate** — you need detergent to loosen grease and organic contaminants for effective results. Unlike detergent, bleach does not break down the surface tension of water, which is why you wash clothes in detergent (or a detergent/bleach mixture) rather than solely in bleach.

The Injection Section

If you use an injector to automatically mix the flower food concentrate with water when filling buckets, remember to flush it at least every three months. Use this method:

- Remove the feeder hose (clear tube) from the concentrate jug and place it in the floral cleaner concentrate.
- Pull the trigger.
- Let the bell casing of the injector fill with cleaner concentrate.
- Let it sit overnight and flush the next morning.
- Drain concentrate into sink or, better yet, use that concentrate cleaner for bucket scrubbing.
- Check the dosage information on the flower food container. Make sure your injector is calibrated accordingly.
- Replace the clear feeder tube back into the flower food concentrate and pump the system for 30 to 60 seconds.
- Start filling buckets.

If injectors have never been flushed, you may need to remove the system from the wall and scrub out the inner basket. To do so, unscrew the bell casing starting at the bottom where the feeder hose runs into casing. Carefully remove inner basket and scrub off any lime deposits. Screw everything back together and then "bleed" the system after everything is back in place to get air out. 🌿

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