

## When Credit is Due

By Gay Smith

**I NEED CREDIT ON THESE FLOWERS! IT DOESN'T MATTER** if you're a wholesaler, grower or retailer — everyone dreads being on the receiving end of this declaration. Prior to making it, most customers have decided the problem has nothing to do with their handling and, therefore, are ready to fight to prove themselves right. Descriptions, such as “bad,” “rotten,” “burned” and a few others I can't use in this article, require tactful trouble-shooting through the landmine of possible conditions from which the complaint stems.

Here are some of the more common complaints that drive buyers to seek credit. Knowing the source of the problem can help prevent recurrences and, ultimately, reduce your need to make that dreaded phone call.

**“My rose heads popped off when I removed the wrapper.”** If blooms fall off in tight bud form, leaving the anthers and pistils intact, the problem is likely ethylene related. When roses are stored for long periods (holiday rotation) or suffer significant exposure to some form of ethylene (exhaust-filled loading areas, or when lunches and decorative mosses are stored in cut-flower coolers), the signs of ethylene damage will show.

If the head breaks off with 3 to 4 inches of stem intact, it's likely from rough handling or impact damage somewhere along the line. Dropping the boxes on the pallet when unloading the truck or slamming bunches on the counter during flower prep will break the rose at the top knuckle on the stem — where the first set of leaves attach. This joint, called the first node, is prone to breakage on some varieties.

**“These roses are old — they're blown open.”** Meet the biggest misconception in the industry: If roses aren't shipped in tight bud, they're old. Ninety percent of new rose varieties require an open cut point to ensure full bloom development. Open-cut roses have a significant increase in bud size during the final four to seven days before harvest. Bud color is more intense the longer it remains on the bush, and the flowers are making carbohydrates as long as they are photosynthesizing on the bush — just what they need to continue opening once harvested. The resulting “springy” petal texture makes for long vase life and disease resistance.

**“This limonium stinks.”** Yes, just like onions or garlic, limonium has a strong odor when you first open the box, but there are only two reasons limonium really stinks: It has overheated itself and suffered subsequent Botrytis infection, or it is just old. To prevent this from happening,

get it out of the box immediately upon arrival and get air moving inside the bunches to dry out the condensation and prevent an outbreak of Botrytis. Limonium florets continue opening if temperature is kept stable, so keep it in the cooler or out on the floor. Avoid taking it in and out.

**“All the foliage (buds, delphinium, wax flowers) fell off.”** Leaf, petal and bud abscission are symptoms of ethylene exposure. Before purchasing, ask your supplier if he is treating ethylene-sensitive flowers with an ethylene inhibitor in post-harvest. Keep flowers away from combustion exhaust, cigarette smoke, fruits, foul bucket water (bacteria produce ethylene as they develop) and any diseased tissues (Botrytis gives off ethylene as it spreads).

**“My sunflower heads are droopy ... My gerberas have bent-neck ... My roses didn't open.”** These are all symptoms of poor hydration — something is impeding flow through cells. Prepare a commercial hydration solution according to the instructions. I recommend using cold water to mix, but whether you use cold or ambient temperature water, mix the proper amount of solution. Give flowers a fresh cut, at least an inch off stems to remove bacteria and callous tissues. Place flowers immediately into solution.

**“Every stem of celosia is moldy.”** Flowers with compacted or ‘hairy’ petal structures (Blue Lace, amaranthus, liatris, statice, lilac, viburnum) suffer Botrytis easily if packed tightly in buckets, sleeved without micro-perforation or moved in and out of coolers. Since Botrytis spores are ever-present, moist flowers are a perfect breeding ground. Process these flowers fast rather than letting the box sit on the floor in the back until all the orders are out and lunches are over. Avoid tight-packed buckets when processing. Set up displays so “dense” flowers don't get dripped on when customers and designers are choosing stems. Good air flow and dry blooms keep Botrytis at bay.

The right solutions, mixed with cold water according to directions is crucial to flower performance. Using correct terminology when reporting problems allows your supplier to act fast in rectifying the situation. Staff training on flower handling makes a huge difference in overall quality. Flower care matters because satisfied customers return again and again! 🌻

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