

## WOW THEIR VOWS WITH HYDRANGEA

> Hydrangeas' head-turning fullness is both their strength and their weakness. It makes them versatile, both delicate and robust all at once. Their size creates a lush, luxurious environment, without overpowering the setting, at weddings and events. However, the largeness of the sepals (not petals) and the woody stem present some hurdles for growers and florists. Some varieties are not suitable to ship and do best at local markets, while others wilt after harvest or shipping.

Fortunately, over the last decade, many cultivars have been introduced that are better suited for the cut flower market. But that doesn't let you and your customers off the hook. Hydrangeas still demand attentive care to reach their vase life potential of four to 11 days, depending on variety.

**Pamper and protect during shipment.** Many suppliers will ship hydrangeas using a transport gel, or in water using bags or picks attached to each stem to keep flowers hydrated during shipping. Foam liners may also be used to protect flowers from heat and damage. Often gel-ice packs are included to keep flowers as cool as possible — this is key to reducing water loss. When packed securely, shipped quickly and protected from high

temperatures, hydrangeas should arrive with little damage or wilting.

**Look for clues in the hues.** Most hydrangeas need to be fully or nearly fully colored when harvested. If harvested too soon, the sepal color will not develop further. Therefore, make sure your supplier sends your hydrangea at this proper stage of development.

**Keep out of storage.** Hydrangeas do not tolerate storage well. The time spent in transit is the most stressful period on hydrangeas. Flowers need to get from the farm to wholesalers, retailers and florists as quickly as possible. Many U.S. suppliers will send flowers overnight, and many international operators send directly from the farm. Plan the arrival of flowers no sooner than three days prior to use. Unlike carnations or chrysanthemums, the hydrangea species does not thrive after a long storage.

**Get 'em wet, fast.** To avoid causing the inflorescences to wilt, don't allow them to be out of water for an extended time. Unpack hydrangeas the instant they arrive. Separate each bloom by gently pulling apart from the bunch. Take extra special care, as hasty handling intermingles, breaks and crushes the inflorescences.

**Precision rules at arrival.** Cut stems with a sharp knife or pruner, removing at

least a half-inch of the stem. Place stems immediately into a freshly made commercial hydration or flower food solution, making sure to remove any bottom leaves submerged in the solution. Hold flowers at room temperature for one to two hours (two to four hours if flowers are limp or wilted). Flower stems (still in solution) should then be placed under cool conditions ranging from 35F to 40F with 80 to 90 percent humidity overnight or until ready for arranging. Check solution level daily.

If you receive wilted flowers, some suppliers recommend immersing the entire bloom and stem completely under cold water and soaking for at least two hours. Others suggest dipping the stem in hot water for 30 seconds before placing into solution. The effectiveness of these methods has not been scientifically proven. So it's a "try it, see if it works" approach. The main culprit in excessive wilting occurs when flowers are out of solution for an extended period. Improper shipping temperature, too lengthy shipping and old flowers also contribute to wilting.

**Wait until the last minute.** Prepare floral arrangements or bouquets as close to the event as possible. Flowers should be removed from the hydration solution, recut and then placed into vases or picks containing a new batch of freshly made flower food. Hold arrangements in the cooler until ready for use. Always check solution level for adequate supply. Hydrangeas have been reported to be slightly sensitive to ethylene, so keep away from ripening fruit, combustible engines and decaying plant material.

**Feed them hardily.** Hydrangeas benefit enormously from flower food. It helps inflorescences stay turgid longer and color remain vivid. Always provide a flower food packet to customers, and remind them to keep flowers out of direct sun. 🌿

**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.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FLORALIFE, INC.

**FEED ME** Hydrangea hydrated in Floralife Hydraflor 100 overnight and then placed in Floralife Crystal Clear flower food lived five days longer than those placed in only water.