# handle with care

*By Bruce Wright*

## When it comes to keeping flowers fresh, designers can make the difference.

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You've made the effort to purchase the freshest flowers possible, and you're conscientious about processing flowers properly when they arrive in the shop. But when it comes time to arrange those flowers, do the design practices in your shop support that investment in flower longevity, or undermine it?

"There's a lot designers can do to mess up what they've already accomplished in terms of processing," says W. Kurt Schroeder AIFD, AAF, PFCI, of South Jersey Floral Company in Deptford, New Jersey. Conversely, of course, good design practices prolong flower life. Which of the following do's and don'ts are common in your shop?

**Keep things clean, the easy way.** Of course, the first step is to make sure your tools, your work surface, your hands, and your containers are scrupulously clean and as free as possible from bacteria. Spritz tools and surfaces regularly with a bleach solution (one part bleach to ten parts water)—or better yet, with a professional floral cleaner. As noted before in this series, professional floral cleaners have a long-lasting power that a bleach solution lacks when it comes to fighting bacteria.

The key here is to make it easy. Make sure each workstation has its own spritz bottle of floral cleaner, so designers can spray the work surface every time it is cleaned of flower debris (at least twice a day).

Equally important is a plentiful supply of fresh towels. A professional towel service may be a good investment in the life of your flowers. Another idea is to keep towels in a bucket filled with bleach solution that is changed daily. "We used that system in my store," says Leanne Kesler AIFD, director of the Floral Design Institute in Portland, Oregon. "We had a system for the towels similar to those used for food service, and it worked beautifully. You pull out a towel, wring it, and put it back in the bleach solution when you're done."

**Keep flowers upright and in water.** One reason you want to keep your work surface clean is that at some point cut flowers are going to come into contact with it. But that doesn't mean it's a good idea to pile cut flowers on your design table. Apart from the fact that they are out of water, you are also putting them at risk of mechanical damage.

Instead, as you take flowers from the cooler, place them in a large clean vase. Let the vase sit on your work surface and pull flowers from there as you create an arrangement. The vase, of course, is full of properly mixed flower-food solution. The flowers remain clean, upright, and hydrated.

**Keep cutting tools sharp.** When cutting tools get dull, they can tear at flower stems, making a ragged, uneven cut instead of a clean one. A ragged cut with a dull cutting tool creates debris in the water, which causes bacteria to collect. It can also damage the cells in the stem that are responsible for solution uptake. Don't wait until cutting tools begin to seem dull; sharpen or replace them on a regular schedule.

Certain flower-shop cutting tasks require pruners. There are two basic types of pruners, notes Kurt: bypass and anvil. Bypass pruners have two blades passing each other like scissors; both blades are cutting blades and must be kept sharp. With anvil pruners, a single cutting blade descends into a groove on a block of metal. "Bypass pruners are the best," says Kurt, because they are less likely to crush the stem.

**Remove foliage—but not all of it.** By the time they reach the design table, your flower stems will already have had foliage removed from the lower one-third of the stem. The idea here is to make sure that no leaves will be submerged below the water line, where they contribute to the growth of bacteria.

Clearly, you also want to remove any leaves that might otherwise interfere with smooth, clean insertion of the stem into foam or into a stem bundle. And of course, you should remove any

**"Make sure each workstation has its own spritz bottle of floral cleaner, so designers can spray it down frequently."**

foliage that is damaged or yellow.

However, it's a good idea to leave some of the upper leaves on the stems of flowers like roses. As explained in the first installment of this series (in the January 2011 issue of *Flowers&*), the leaves of many flowers have specialized cells that help to make sure the stem keeps pumping water from the cut end up to the bloom. If the design concept allows, leave some foliage on the stem.

**Use foliage strippers; avoid damage to the stem.** What's the best way to remove foliage? As important as a sharp knife or pruner is for cutting stem ends, it's not necessary for removing leaves. In fact, when you use a knife for this purpose, you increase the risk of scraping and damaging the outer layer of the stem, says Kurt—and the wound provides an entry point for bacteria.

"Handheld rubber flower strippers are nonabrasive to the stem; they're fine," he affirms. "A protective cloth held in your hand, a potato masher—any of these are OK for removing foliage, as long as you do it quickly and efficiently and only remove what you need to."

**Recut stem ends at an angle.** Always recut stems just before inserting them into foam or into a vase. When you are designing in foam, the angle cut lets the flower stem end slide easily into floral foam, where a straight-cut stem end tends to push the foam down and crush it so it doesn't deliver moisture as efficiently. Even when you are making a vase arrangement, the angle cut can make it easier to insert the stem smoothly and without damage into the network of previously placed stems.

After assembling a hand-tied bouquet, recut the stems individually using a very sharp, clean pair of garden clippers, just before lowering the entire bouquet into a vase filled with properly mixed flower-food solution.

**Use the right foam.** It used to be said that floral foam did not provide the same vase life as flower-food solution by itself. With the latest advances in floral foam, that calculus has changed. Studies by Smithers-Oasis suggest that flowers in its new MaxLife foam last as long or longer than in water.

**"Stems should be inserted as deep in the foam as possible. It's not enough to just push until it feels secure."**

Foam is available in different densities that may be more appropriate for soft-stemmed flowers on the one hand or heavy flowers on the other. However, all-purpose, fresh-flower foam is more than adequate for most situations.

**Soak the foam properly.** The most important step—and the most frequently mishandled, believe it or not—is to soak the foam in properly mixed flower-food solution. As always when you are mixing flower-food solution, it's vital to get the flower food and the water in correct proportion. A simple way to accomplish that is to mark the side of buckets or cans so you can see how high they should be filled if you use a certain number of scoops or squirts of flower food.

Soak the foam by letting it float on the surface of the solution until it sinks. Don't try to speed up the process by pushing it down, as this can create dry pockets within the foam. "Face the side of the foam that has small dots to the water source for faster absorption," advises Sharon McGukin AIFD, AAF, PFCI, a Design Director for Smithers-Oasis.

"Avoid doing what many florists do," Kurt says: "they fill up a trash can, soak foam in it, then remove the soaked foam, and as long as there's something liquid in the can, they keep adding more foam." You may have noticed that when you soak floral foam in flower-food solution, the solution turns green. That's because byproducts from the foam leach into it. It's best to start with new solution every time you soak a new batch of foam. "Have a sink or vat with a drain in it," Kurt suggests, so you can easily replace the solution.

**Use enough foam, but leave room to add water.** Only experience and common sense can tell you how much foam you need to support a given number of stems and keep them hydrated over a reasonable period of time. "Of course, if you start with a block of foam, and you put 100 stems in it, it will dry out sooner than if you put 50 stems in it," says Kurt. Through the process of transpiration, all those living flowers are breathing out moisture, which is supplied by the floral foam and must be replaced.

By the same token, the more stems you insert into the foam, the more important it is *not* to fill the container entirely with foam. You need a reservoir where the customer can add more flower-food solution without pouring it directly on top of the foam (where it may spill).

If you find that you are reaching the physical limits of floral foam to receive new insertions without crumbling—if insertions wobble or seem insecure—then you have undoubtedly exceeded the optimal capacity of the foam to keep flowers fresh.

**Make insertions deeply and deliberately.** "Too often, we stop pushing the flower in once the stem feels secure in the foam," says Sharon—at about one inch deep. That's not really deep enough. At least, it's certainly not ideal for your most thirsty flowers. Remember that the top of the foam will dry out before the bottom. Also, the deeper the insertion, the more securely the stem is positioned.

"You want to insert as many stems as possible deep in the foam," says Kurt. "Other things being equal, you might want to insert thirsty premium flowers like roses first, deep in the foam. Leave the perimeter of the foam for tender stems or those that aren't as long," but continue to make your insertions as deep as possible.

Kurt also advises designers to "avoid changing your mind: be deliberate about your placements." Pulling stems in and out of the foam chews it up and weakens it. Also, when you pull a stem back out, even just a little, you may be creating an air pocket in the foam. "If there's flower-food solution in that void that you've just created, you're fine, but if there's not, you're in trouble," says Kurt.

In the end, your flowers deserve careful, skilled handling from you so that customers can enjoy their beauty, and that of your design, as long as possible.