

A Passion *for* Performance

A florist offers an eight-day rose guarantee and turns his back room into a haven for care and handling experiments in his quest to find long-lasting varieties.

At first glance, the back room of Knight's Flowers looks like any other flower shop. It's certainly not unusual to see vases of roses, alstroemeria, pom poms and mini carnations ready for arranging. But wait a minute — what's with the 36 vases holding three stems each? No, it's not the beginnings of a designer's assembly line. These floral beauties will never see the inside of a home or an office. They've given their lives to science.

A Profitable Obsession

Dean Knight hovers over his care and handling experiment, methodically checking each vase, scrutinizing petals, writing down comments. In his quest to find long-lasting flowers, Knight's research is exhaustive. He uses control groups and

replicating procedures *a la* care and handling guru George Staby of Perishables Research Organization in Heldsburg, Calif. Most florists can understand a search for a long-lasting red rose, but a mini carnation? While his ever-increasing knowledge of new varieties and their life spans have made him a coveted speaker at state floral conventions, critics may call Knight's research picky, even a little obsessive. But with it, Knight has been able to put his money where his mouth is by offering an eight-day guarantee on his arrangements — even roses. His passion for floral longevity has paid off, resulting in a triple increase in gross sales in just 10 years at his Clinton, Tenn., store.

Learning the Hard Way

After working in New York and San Francisco in the early days of his floral career, Knight

BY KRISTIN YOUNG

Dean Knight of Knight's Flowers in Clinton, Tenn., puts his flowers to the test with an eight-day guarantee.



Photo: Joe Harper

returned home to Tennessee. His dad put him to work in one of the family's three floral shops. The store wasn't pulling in much of a profit, so Knight decided to find a hook to get people in the door. He "wowed" his customers with varieties — at least 50 different flowers to choose from. "You ought to go in that place, my customers would tell people," Knight says. "They have everything under the rainbow."

But Knight's colorful marketing plan was short lived. Many of the varieties would die off faster than Knight could sell them. With one-third of his product in the trash can, he sold at cost another part of his inventory just to get it out the door. He soon started to get complaints that his floral arrangements didn't last very long. "When you keep that up," he says, "you soon notice that you aren't making any money."

That's when he decided to try a different tact. He would only sell flowers that would last at least one week after they left his shop. "Price really isn't a concern for customers," he says. "It's the value in how long the flower lasts."

The Tests Begin

Although it takes Knight an hour each day to check test results, his care and handling test itself is simple. He follows Staby's care and handling approach (see *The Test*, page 20).

He places one variety of flowers in plain water as the control group. In another container, he places the same variety of flowers in the correct propor-

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The Test

Do you want to set up your own floral variety longevity test? Here's how Dean Knight of Knight's Flowers in Clinton, Tenn., does it:

Remove all bunch ties and sleeves.

Randomly select flowers from each bunch for treatment.

Remove bottom foliage that would be under water.

Recut stems underwater.

Hydrate roses one hour (Ph is 3.5).

Place flowers in vases filled with fresh flower food solution.

Place flowers in even light and temperature conditions.

Add plain tap water to vase solutions when low.

Record daily flower life, and remove flowers when they are judged to be unacceptable.

Calculate and record average flower life by variety when all flowers are judged to be unacceptable.

—K.Y.



tion of flower food and water. Once he finds a variety that keeps well for eight days, he replicates the test three times at one-week intervals. "It's not unusual to get flowers that do well one week and aren't worth a thing the next," he says.

When Knight finds a variety he likes, he tests that variety from another grower. The test helps him find a consistent grower. "Of course, I couldn't test every grower," Knight says, already up to his knees with the newest varieties sent to him for testing from a number of growers. To narrow the field, he says he works with reputable growers whose product is known for its consistency and for its flower quality. A few favorites: Ameri-Cal Floral in Watsonville, Calif., and Equiflor, CFX, Inc. and Gardens America, all in Miami.

Now, when he picks up the phone to talk to his wholesaler, he can ask for a particular variety from a particular grower. "It's like when you go to the supermarket," he says. "You'll buy a specific brand and will be willing to pay a little more to get that brand, but if

they don't have it, I don't buy it."

Where the Varieties Are

To find out what's new in flowers, Knight recommends a number of venues. A great place to start is the Society of American Florists' (SAF) Outstanding Varieties Competition held at its convention in September. Growers vie for top honors in a number of categories (see *Floral Management*, November 1997). "If I see something that is really hot, I ask my wholesaler to order it," Knight says. Since this year's convention was cancelled due to Hurricane Georges, the competition will be held at FloraWorld '99, January 7-10 in Atlanta. Look for a recap of the winners in the March 1999 issue of *Floral Management*. Knight is also a big fan of *Floral Management's* Fresh Choices column (see page 14). "If I see a variety that looks interesting," he says, "I check for the grower's name next to the photo. That way I will be able to tell my wholesaler where to get it."

Eight-Day Roses

Dean Knight of Knight's Flowers in Clinton, Tenn., tests his roses to see how long they will last. With proper care and handling procedures, like hydrating, using the proper amount of preservative and cutting the stems under water, he has found a number of varieties that he can guarantee will last for eight days. Here are his top picks for roses — most of which are hydroponically grown in California (he is just beginning his tests on Colombian roses).

Red: 'Obsession' and 'Kardinal'

Pink: 'Delores'

Yellow: 'Briana' and 'Emblem'

White: 'Bianca' and 'Lady Liberty'

Lavender: 'Bluebird' (somewhat inconsistent)

Bicolor: 'Toscanini' and 'Vendela'

Bonus tip: You'll get customers requesting such roses as 'Sterling Silver' because of its lovely scent — just make sure customers know that the better a rose smells, the shorter its vase life (a tradeoff many customers are willing to endure).

—K.Y.

One more way to find new varieties is in cyberspace. Check out SAF's member Web site at www.safnow.org. Click on the link to growers and wholesalers. Pick a company and look at its Web page. If a company gets a new variety, it's more than likely the company will showcase it on its site.

Care and Handling

After you hunt down the newest in varieties, can you guarantee they will last eight days? The best way to keep the floral grim reaper at bay is to institute a care and handling program. After Knight adopted one, his shop's cost of goods dropped by eight percent. "Before

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we had one," he says, "we were throwing flowers away by the armfuls."

In the 1980s Knight made his own care and handling concoctions out of citric acid. The mixtures worked fine as long as he made them, but when it came to his employees helping out, none of them could remember the proportions. Now, he tries to find care and handling products that are simple to use.

A care and handling regime doesn't have to be rocket science, he says. With roses for example, start with the basics: Cut your roses under water, put them in flower food (a chart tells his employees what solutions to use) and place them in the cooler. One way Knight keeps up to date on freshness is by ordering his roses to all arrive on the same date. That way, it's easier to keep track how many days he has had them in the cooler.

A Lasting Impression

Knight doesn't like to play Russian Roulette with his product, especially his customers' favorite — roses. If he doesn't sell his roses within six days, he cuts the stems and either puts them in funeral arrangements or sells them as

cash and carry. He guarantees the \$9.99 bunch of roses will last for five days.

For mixed arrangements, Knight automatically forewarns his customers that certain floral varieties are not long lasting. He adds a care tag that states that iris, gerbera, tulips and sunflowers will wilt after a few days. That way, he won't get a call to replace a whole arrangement.

The designer signs and dates the signature card. If there is a problem, a customer can call the designer directly. Problems rarely happen, Knight says. Even on Valentine's Day when Knight's Flowers sells thousands of roses, he says, at worst, he receives two complaints. He attributes this success to giving his customers the longest lasting flowers for their money. "It's important to believe that it's not the first impression," Knight says, "but the lasting impression that you give your customers that counts." ■

Kristin Young is senior editor of Floral Management.