make your roses last

Valentine's Day is right around the corner. Learn how to increase the vase life of this holiday's most requested flowers.

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WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE "QUEEN OF FLOWERS" steals the show on Valentine's Day. But just how long does that show last? You can increase the vase life of your roses by tending to a few key details. Broaden your understanding of the basic fundamentals of rose care to groom the longest-lasting blooms.

KNOW YOUR CULTIVARS

Roses of different names vary greatly in their performance for consumers. To give consumers satisfaction, a rose should last at least 10 days in the vase. But you can deliver blossoms that will look good for as long as 15 or 20 days if you know which cultivars last longest and if you handle them correctly.

In our studies, 'Poison' (pink), 'Reward' (red), and 'Valentino' (red) proved to be the longest-lasting varieties, with staying power of at least 18 days when placed in a solution containing flower food. For roses that will last from 12 to 15 days, try 'Eliza' (fuchsia), 'Light Orlando' (pink), or 'Red Jewel.' Flower foods definitely boost blossom longevity.

As you determine which roses you want to carry, select varieties that not only last well in the vase but that also open fully. Some roses tend to remain closed, no matter how long they last. The most notorious varieties for this are 'Marlyse' (pink) and 'Red Unique,' both of which consistently fail to open, even when placed in flower-food solutions. On the whole, keeping roses in fresh flower foods enhances blossom opening although the effect does vary by cultivar.

SELL THE COOLEST ROSES

One of the hottest trends in floral display could mark the downfall of vase life: displaying flowers out of the coolers. While this practice creates a festive floral atmosphere, it cuts vase life to the quick—unless you dramatically reduce thermostat settings in the display area.

The ideal storage temperature for cut roses is 33 F to 35 F. For every degree increase over this range, vase life decreases dramatically for all rose cultivars. There's little risk of freezing flowers held in this range; the freezing point for rose blooms is below 20 F. It's important to monitor cooler and solution temperatures to make sure your roses are being coddled—neither overheated nor frozen.

If you display roses outside the cooler, remember that every day they are displayed on the floor is one day less of satisfaction for your customer.

Depending on the volume of flowers your shop handles over Valentine's Day and the amount of cooler space you have available, you may want to consider leasing free-standing coolers or refrigerated trucks to pamper flowers with perfect storage conditions. The end result is blooms that last and that your customers will be glad to pay for, again and again.

SANITATION SAVES FLOWERS

Running a clean business also enhances vase life of roses. Keep buckets and tubs sterile by washing them

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with detergent and rinsing them with a 1:10 bleach-water solution. Use the same mixture to wipe down cooler shelves, doors, and floors. Make sure all of your cutting tools have sharp, clean blades.

The goal of cleanliness is reducing microbial populations around fresh cut stems to prevent stem plugging. When stems are plugged with bacteria, flowers cannot take up water freely. For roses, any interruption in water uptake leads to bent necks. Commercial flower foods contain biocides that effectively kill microorganisms associated with fresh cut roses.

When roses arrive in your shop, recut stems, removing 1 inch to 2 inches. Some shops favor cutting stems underwater. Our research shows that submerged cutting is unnecessary and may actually increase microbial infection and stem plugging. Some commercial solutions may reduce microbial buildup in underwater cutters, but these solutions have not been shown to increase flower life.

Plunge freshly cut stems into clean buckets filled with fresh flower food immediately after making cuts. The only way you can successfully store cut roses dry (out of solution) is to place them in a cooler maintained at 33 F.

Carelessly removing leaves and thorns from roses can wound the stems and introduce another chance for microbial infection. However, leaves that will fall below the water line should be removed. Also, do not allow leaves, leaf pieces, or thorns to accumulate in storage buckets. This, too, increases the chance for microbial multiplication.

The last step to ensuring long-lasting, quality flowers involves the atmosphere in your facility. Some rose varieties are susceptible to ethylene damage, which, depending on the variety, may prevent or accelerate opening, cause early fading, accelerate shattering, and/or create abnormal opening. Reduce the occurrence of ethylene in your work areas and shop by removing fresh fruits, which produce this invisible gas.

Don't allow delivery vehicles to idle dock side, and prohibit smoking in your facility. Vehicle exhausts and smoke both contain high concentrations of ethylene. If you suspect that ethylene may be affecting your roses, make sure that your supplier treats them with an anti-ethylene agent like STS or EthylBloc.

READY, SET, SELL!

One part of the care and handling puzzle is your suppliers. You must know from where your roses come. Not every Valentine's Day rose is cut on February 13 (or even the 12th). But you should know when your roses were cut, by whom they were grown, and how they were handled and stored until you got them. If they weren't stored at the proper temperature (32 F) or were stored too long, they may not open and will assuredly have a short vase life. If they weren't placed in clean buckets, you may not be able to rehydrate them, or their necks may bend prematurely.

If you want to position yourself as the florist whose roses last the longest, you must work with wholesalers who are equally committed to proper handling procedures. This commitment to quality often eliminates bargain-basement blooms. Know that if you're aiming to sell the longest-lasting roses, you'll likely have to pay more for them. You can pass that cost to your customers, and if you're truly delivering roses with long vase lives, they'll gladly pay.

If you purposefully select and sell the longest-lasting rose varieties and take steps to ensure their longevity, promote that to your clientele. As you master the tricks of the increased vase-life trade, you can even guarantee bouquets of some varieties to last a minimum number of days. A dozen roses that lasts a dozen days would easily please today's value-minded consumers and would also likely reduce the amount of returns to your business.

As the nation's favorite holiday devoted to love and affection looms, make a bed of roses for your business. Stock long-lasting varieties, keep them where it's cool and clean, and get set to enjoy compliments from satisfied customers.