GOOD TO GREAT GERBS

Long lasting, colorful and versatile — that’s a concise description of a flower you know well: gerberas. Discovered more than 100 years ago, gerberas gained interest as cut flowers because of their impressive vase life (13 days on average). As part of the Asteraceae family (formerly Compositae), gerberas have ties to asters, chrysanthemums, dahlias, dandelions, lettuce, marigolds, sunflowers and zinnias and are known for their long ray petals, tight petal rows surrounding the disk (eye) and super-tight inner disk flowers (the eye).

When you include germinis and gerrondos, the gerbera is the fifth-most-used cut flower worldwide, according to a 2009 Composite Genome Project report. Don’t let their popularity fool you, though, or lull you into complacency. These friendly flowers need your attention, and best practices for purchasing, processing and storing can help you achieve best-in-class results.

Fresh Market

How can you tell your gerberas are primed for staying power? Upon receiving, examine the middle layer of stamens surrounding the eye. In spring and summer months, look for flowers with at least two circles of stamens (also called trans florets) at harvest. In fall and winter, look for at least three full circles of trans florets. For gerrondos, it’s more about the shape of the flower (well shaped and developed) as it’s almost impossible to see stamens. Check ray petals for signs of disease (e.g., pepper spots, beige legions) and stems for signs of scrapes or brown blotches. Reject mushy or discolored stems.

Many Dutch growers, however, say that 48 F to 50 F is the correct post-harvest holding temperature range. Their premise is that fluctuating temps result in a micro film of condensation — enough for Botrytis spores to germinate. They tend to chill blooms only after they are packed for transit.

Because results from tests at UC Davis show that gerberas last far longer when stored cold, I recommend cold storage at 33 F to 35 F.

Processing with Power

Gerberas are the Mr. Clean of the flower world. The small hairs on wooly stems act as magnets for bacteria, making clean solutions and tools critical to good flow.

Chlorinated water is the best solution after harvest and after dry transport. A slow-release chlorine pill in a half gallon of water provides about 50 parts per million of active chlorine for up to three days. (Careful: Brown blotches will appear on stems if the chlorine level is too high.) Once stems are filled with clean water, transfer them into flower food for arrangements and bouquet display buckets.

I recommend a water analysis to avoid problems with high alkalinity, salts and chemicals that damage flowers. Fluoride, for example, is toxic to gerbera, as well as to gladiolus, tuberous roses, roses and freesia. In addition, never use softened water for flowers or to water potted plants. The high salt content is deadly. Finally, don’t drip on gerberas. Water migrates to the center of the bloom, providing a bathtub for Botrytis spores.

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Cold Wars

University of California, Davis, research shows that gerberas should be held at 33 F to 35 F; stem cells continue to grow when temperatures are above 36 F post-harvest. Cold temps also inhibit the tropism effect of stem bending when packed horizontally. (Transit temperature fluctuations may explain why stems arrive crooked.)