

# Fresh Choices

Trend-Setting Tips for Buying Fresh Cut Flowers and Greens

## Put Protea in its Place

**T**HE SEASON OF CENTERPIECES IS UPON US. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanakkuh, Kwanza, various holiday office parties, New Year's Eve — whatever the reason people get together in the next few months, they'll likely be getting together around some big table or buffet.

To make sure the centerpiece is also a conversation piece, invite members of the attention-getting *Proteaceae* family, like the bold and bristly banksias and always colorful protea. Customer crowd on the conservative side? With 1,400 species, and at least 70 varieties, the family offers enough versatility to blend in with exotic themes, sophisticated settings and earthy environments. And they won't wimp out of the party early. In addition to having an average vase life of two to three weeks, both banksia and protea can be dried and dyed to stick around.

### Fall Fashions

The whisk-like, wire brush-shaped banksias add texture and a vertical line to Thanksgiving designs dominated by smooth gourds and conical cornucopias. The acorn-shaped *Banksia prionotes* (1), with white tips over orange, is another uncommon item for the Thanksgiving season. Available in the United States May through October, *B. prionotes* is imported from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa October through April. For a punchier orange, *B. Ashybi* (2) has large, deep sunrise-tinted flowers that grow to 20 cm. on 50- to 70-inch stems.

'Susara' (3), a new hybrid protea, brings a soft and warm tone to the autumn spectrum with its peach coloring. 'Susara' is about 3 1/2 to 4 inches in diameter, with blue-gray foliage. Hybrids offer increased longevity, less leaf blackening and better shipability.

"Protea and banksias fit beautifully with harvest colors," says designer Rene van Rems, AIFD, PFCI. And their velvety feel closes the deal with centerpiece customers who may still want traditional harvest hues, but also demand an extra oomph of tactile sensation. "It's like they have to touch it when they see it."

### Hip Holidays

Designers rely on protea's impressive head diameter and unexpected colorings to demand attention. Don't let that size intimidate you. "The most common thing I hear about protea is that they are too big," says Dean Yale, AIFD, a designer for Walt Disney properties. "You need to rethink the design so that the protea becomes the focal point or major accent in the design." Another bonus is that it takes much less

material to make the design (and to impress customers who feels as if they're getting something different.) "So do the math, less flowers, less labor, higher price equals more profit," Yale says.

A favorite that's in high production in late summer and early fall is 'Pink Ice,' (4) a hot pink hybrid available from August through April. It's "perfect for Christmas," thanks to the grayish-silver tint of the foliage that blends well with pines and firs, van Rems says. Pink gets playful with 'Pink Mink', a protea with soft, feathery ends of the petals. "So many people entertain at home now and these colors are suited for muted home environments," he says.

Need a new addition to traditional red and green holiday designs? Unlike some of the dusty pinks, whites and salmons of other protea, 'Red Baron,' (5) is a bold fire-engine red that can stand on its own or blend with conventional holiday foliage and berries. 'Holiday Red,' (6) *P. Obtusifolia*, has creamy white undertones mixed with a true red on top, reminiscent of candy cane colors. It's available November through April. ❁

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