

Romantic and long-lasting, the new waxflower hybrids offer fantastic value.

What do you want in a filler flower? Dense clusters of small yet abundant blooms, perched at the top of sturdy yet flexible stems? A romantic, five-petaled flower form, surrounded by attractive yet unobtrusive piney foliage? A range of blush colors that harmonize beautifully with roses?

Waxflower can offer all of these, plus—when it is properly grown and prepared for market—an excellent vase life. Old-timers in the industry may remember when it was not uncommon to open a box of waxflower and find that most of the blooms were on the bottom of the box. That's rare nowadays. But wax is a flower that varies widely in quality and price, from one supplier to the next as well as seasonally and by variety. It pays to be a savvy buyer.

WHEN AND WHERE Waxflower has two seasons. It is native to Australia—and in the land Down Under, it is harvested from July through December. During that time period buyers in the U.S. and other countries in the Northern Hemisphere also receive waxflower from South Africa and Peru. The second season is from January through June; this is when wax blooms on flower farms in southern California, Portugal and Israel.

"Waxflower requires a very specific, semi-arid climate," says Steve Dionne, president of Wafex USA, a company formed as a sister company to the largest exporter of Australian native flowers, also called Wafex. "You need sandy soil, hot days in the summertime, certain temperature ranges in the winter months, and no excessive rainfall."

Southern California has one of the environments perfect for growing waxflower, as growers there realized about 35 years ago. That's when southern California avocado and citrus farmers



Esperanza



Madonna



Majestic Pink



Chantilly Lace



Moonlight Delight



Painted Lady



Revelation



Romance



My Sweet 16



Sarah's Delight



Strawberry Surprise

by Bruce Wright

CALIFORNIA FAVORITES Different waxflower varieties peak at different times all through the California season, says Diana Roy at Resendiz Brothers, a grower specializing in wax along with other flowers (www.resendizbrothers.com): "We start with some of the hybrids as early as December, and by the time we get to May or June the assortment has probably changed three or four times." Among the favorites are 'Madonna' and 'Revelation'—both hybrids that have been on the market for a while, but remain very popular. 'Majestic Pink' sports especially large blooms (as does its sister variety, 'Majestic White'). 'Romance' is intriguing because it offers mostly white and mostly pink flowers on the same stem. Like some other varieties, says Diana, "the longer you leave it on the bush, the more colorful it becomes. 'Purple Pride', for example: when it first starts to bloom, it's lighter, but the longer it's left on the bush, the deeper purple it becomes. Even some of the varieties of white eventually start to blush." The vase life is not affected by waiting longer to harvest, but most growers won't wait to let the color develop.

NEW FROM DOWN UNDER New waxflower hybrids from Helix, a division of Australian flower exporter Wafex, offer bigger, more densely clustered blooms that are more shatter-resistant than in the past. Some Helix hybrids are already being harvested in California as well as in Australia, South Africa, or wherever waxflower is grown; others are only just coming into production, or are as yet available only as imports. 'Chantilly Lace' is as dainty and white as the name suggests. 'Moonlight Delight', a blue-ribbon winner at the SAF Outstanding Varieties Competition, offers extra-large white flowers with a crimson center in early to mid spring; when the closed red buds are still present, they add to the appeal. 'My Sweet 16' begins as a mass of pure white flowers that mature to a rich red shade; in between, both white and red blooms may appear on the same stem. 'Sarah's Delight' is a vibrant pink with a crimson center; 'Strawberry Surprise' is a mid pink with a frilly appearance, like a semi-double. Of true doubles, there are only a handful of waxflower varieties; they include pink 'Dancing Queen' (not shown), with extra-long stems. More at www.helixaustralia.com.au and www.wafex.com.au.

also began to diversify into other Australian and South African native flowers like proteas, leucadendrons, and pincushions.

Waxflower harvest in California starts officially in January (sometimes earlier), but peaks February through early May. So, the two seasons for wax, north and south, overlap—but just barely, meaning there is extra demand for varieties that bloom early and late in the season, wherever they are grown.

A CHANGING MIX OF VARIETIES The mix of available varieties changes quite a bit over the course of the season. "We grow over 40 different varieties, but they peak at different times," says Dave Clark, director of sales and marketing at Kendall Farms in Fallbrook, California—the largest grower of waxflower in the U.S., with over 200 acres. "Some are the new hybrids, some are the old-school types. But it's only by growing different varieties that we're able to start shipping at the beginning of the year and go all the way to the middle of the year. If for purple wax we had only 'Purple Pride', for example, we'd be cutting it in March and April, and that would be it. But during the season, we'll always have some wax variety in purple, pink or white to satisfy designers' needs."

CONSIDER THE SOURCE Some wax varieties are grown worldwide, others are more strongly associated with certain countries. "California and Australia grow more of the newer hybrids," according to Steve Dionne. "Peru and Israel are much heavier to the standard varieties"—some of which ('Purple Pride', for example) retain an important niche in the market everywhere.

But when you compare the waxflower that comes from different countries, other factors also come into play. At Resendiz Brothers—another California grower specializing in wax along with proteas and other flowers—Diana Roy notes that "California bunches" have a reputation as thicker and taller than imports: "When you're shipping overseas, freight is expensive, so the growers will often cut stems shorter to save on freight." Import bunches average 24 inches

long and 300 to 350 grams in weight, she estimates, where California bunches are often 36 inches or longer and 400 to 500 grams. Also, some growers, when they harvest, are inclined to remove some of the laterals. At Resendiz Brothers, the laterals stay on the stem, for a fuller bunch.

LATERAL THINKING Those lateral stems are what make wax such a great value, whether you're making bouquets or arrangements, argues Steve Dionne. "If you're making bouquets, one stem gives you pretty solid coverage on the surface of the bouquet, with as many as three to six flowering laterals on top of the main stem. But if you're making arrangements in foam, you can clip those laterals off the main stem and use them that way. So you get a very high usage on a per stem basis. I think that's one reason people like waxflower so much."

TINTS AND TONES Another reason could be the colors: from white and cream to pinks and reds to lavenders and dark purple, as well as stunning two- and three-tone combinations. "There are no natural blues or greens, yellow or oranges," says Steve. "But waxflower takes a stem dye beautifully, so in the fall, my sales go crazy on fall-colored tinted wax: yellow, orange, red, bronze." And it's not only white wax that is tinted: "Our best-selling tint is called Aussie Gold," Steve explains. "They take 'Purple Pride', which is a plum purple with a white ring around the center, and they tint it with yellow dye. The purple takes up the yellow and turns a rich bronze, while the white ring in the center turns pure yellow, so you end up with a bronze bloom with a yellow ring in the middle." The dye doesn't affect the longevity of the bloom, according to Steve. "Fall-colored filler flowers are hard to come by," he adds, "so this is a very popular option."

NO BEARDS Sometimes, especially toward the end of the season, waxflower grows a "beard": the foliage grows an inch or two past the flowers, which gives a grassy effect not generally considered desirable. Warmer



Sunny slopes like these at Kendall Farms (www.kendall-farms.com), with well-draining soil and no excessive rainfall, offer the perfect environment for growing waxflower.

weather or extra rain might stimulate this added growth. "It's the plant starting to go back into its growth stage," says Diana Roy. "If it happens, we'll just prune it, clean it up. But we don't have as much of a 'bearding' problem with the newer, hybrid varieties; it's more the standard varieties."

LASTING LONGER With proper treatment—both in the field and after it has been harvested—waxflower is a hardy crop. Like other Australian natives, it is built to retain moisture (hence the "waxy" flowers and needle-like foliage) and hold up in the heat. But wax has two enemies: botrytis mold and ethylene.

"Botrytis is probably the number-one problem," says Kendall Farms' Dave Clark. "It's an airborne mold, and it's everywhere. When the wax gets wet, at certain temperatures the botrytis will bloom, and that's what causes the most damage later on. But if you treat the flowers on a regular basis out in the field then you lessen the likelihood of botrytis being a problem in the bucket or in the box."

"The second huge problem is ethylene," Dave continues. "We can't always control the amount of ethylene that waxflower is exposed to in shipping, but we use EthylBloc to help protect it, and also TransportCare, which is a paper infused with chlorine dioxide, to protect against botrytis. Those are the two things that make the buds drop from waxflower."

"Once we harvest it, we cool waxflower to 34 degrees F and store it at that temperature until it goes on a refrigerated truck. With all those steps, we very rarely have to give credit to a customer on our wax. If we do, generally it has to do with the cold chain being broken somewhere down the line: a reefer being turned off, or a box sitting out on a dock."

"Overall, I think standards have really improved in the past few years," says Dave. "EthylBloc has been around for a while, but the

Waxflower
Chamaelucium uncinatum

Availability:
Year-round

Colors:
White, cream, pinks, purples, rose-red

Vase life:
5 days up to three weeks

Ethylene sensitivity:
High

Bunch size:
Grower bunches

CARE TIPS

WAXFLOWER

- Look for stems without brown spots or yellow leaves; avoid stems that are dropping or shedding either flowers or leaves. These symptoms can result from botrytis mold or ethylene gas. Ask your supplier about whether the waxflower you purchase has been treated for protection from botrytis and ethylene, and whether it has been kept at proper low temperatures during storage and transport.
- Purchase stems with at least a quarter and up to four-fifths of the flowers fully open.
- Remove any leaves that will be below the surface of the water. Recut stems and place into a flower-food solution. Store, if necessary, at 32-34 degrees Fahrenheit.

chlorine dioxide sheets are newer. And with the newest varieties, the breeders have done a lot to combat the problems that people have associated with wax flower in the past."

CREATING CHOICES Well more than 50 varieties of waxflower are being grown commercially today—out of more than 400 named hybrids and varieties in existence. "There will always be a place for the standards, because they're ubiquitous, and they're aggressively priced," says Steve Dionne. "But the future of wax lies in the new hybrids."

Developing new varieties always takes patience and persistence. Still, breeders have been hard at work, and as a result, buyers today have more choices than ever before: "At the peak of my impact season, I had easily over 20 varieties available," says Steve. And if there's one thing flower buyers appreciate, it's having more choices—all of them good ones! 🌸



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