POWER UP YOUR PROTEAS

> With alluring colors, exotic shapes and rugged woody stems, proteas are the new "it" bloom. The family tree originates in South Africa and these flowers are vibrant and hardy. Vase life is always a concern for flower farmers, wholesalers, florists and consumers. Proteas have a reputation for having a long vase life, but even the most resilient cut flowers will not last if they do not receive proper care.

Farmers see proteas when they are at their best — in the field on the bush! Once harvested, proteas slowly start deteriorating. It's slowing down that waning process that makes all the difference.

Look for Quality Clues

Purchasing the freshest proteas possible is a great start. How do you know whether the flowers are fresh, or whether they have been sitting in a cooler room for days (or even weeks)? With many types of blooms, it can be difficult to spot the difference; often only the farmer can tell. However, with proteas there are some key clues.

Protea blooms should be clean and evenly colored, with no bruised or grayish bracts. Leaves should be green and healthy looking. Certain protea species, such as *eximia*, occasionally experience leaf blackening, which can happen even under the best circumstances. If you discover leaf blackening, but the protea otherwise appears fresh and healthy, a good trick is to remove the leaves, making the flowers even more prominent.

Proteas open over an extended period of time. As soon as the flower's bracts begin to separate at the tip of the bloom, they should be harvested. With genera such as *leucospermum*, *isopogon* or *waratah*, once the stamens emerge from the center of the flower and unfold out of base, farmers will pick them and the flowers will continue to open. As a rule of thumb, buy proteas that have not fully opened and enjoy watching them as they do.

Best Practices Put into Action

Fresh water is vital to the vase life of proteas. Processing stems in flower food will stop bacteria from growing. Proteas thrive in high-sugar solutions such as Chrysal Professional #3 Vase Solutions. Because of the complexity of their flower head, proteas have a very high respiratory requirement to complete their development. Re-cutting protea stems is an important part of their care because the stem tip may become blocked, preventing it from transporting water up to bloom. Cutting ¼ inch off the base of stems can increase the vase life of proteas by up to 45 percent.

Rough handling of the foliage and stem can release tannins into the water, which, when absorbed by the stems, can cause leaf discoloration. Removing leaves below the water line will also ensure the water stays fresh and that bacteria does not develop around the stems, choking off the water supply.

"Clean and fresh" takes on new meaning with proteas. Your buckets, containers, vases, knives, clippers, and other equipment must be sanitized. Bacteria can live in a dry bucket or vase for months. Proteas are thirsty flowers and can take up 75 to 80 percent of the water in the first hour. Cold or warm water can help rehydrate stems faster than water at room temperature. Replenish water regularly. If the container is not transparent, check it every few days.

The best holding temperature range for proteas is 38 to 42 F. Proteas like cool temperatures and a well-lit cooler (they prefer to rest with the light on). Before displaying proteas, leave the stems in a cool place for at least two hours, or ideally overnight. This ensures that the flowers are fully hydrated before returning to a warmer environment. Keep proteas out of direct sunlight whenever possible.

MIND YOUR PROTEA Caring for proteas, including Protea King Madiba, is relatively straightforward with some best practice standards in place.

Diana Roy is the business manager of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers in Fallbrook, California. In September, the grower won Floral Management's Marketer of the Year award for its efforts to popularize proteas. Read about their campaign at **safnow.org/moreonline.**
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