

It's hard to believe that we have already made it to Valentine's Day this year! It seems like we were just ringing in the New Year, and now spring is right around the corner. First though, we get to celebrate our loved ones, and a very common way to do that is with flowers. Whether you buy them for yourself, have them bought for you, or buy them for someone else, there are ways to prolong the life of the flowers, allowing you or your loved one to enjoy them longer.

The thing that most affects how long flowers will last is when they were originally cut. Many flowers are now grown in South America and shipped here to be sold. Those few extra days between when they were cut and when they make it to the consumer make a huge difference. Fresh cut flowers will last much longer. There isn't much you can do about this, but pay attention to who you buy flowers from. Some florists will grow their own or have them grown locally.

Before you can put your lovely flowers in water, examine them. Are there any leaves that will be below the water level when you put them into the vase? These should be removed, because they will rot with prolonged contact with water. This can cause bacteria and fungi in the water, shortening the life of the flowers. If you aren't sure if the vase you are planning on using is clean or not, wash it with a ten percent bleach solution. Make sure to rinse it afterward so that the bleach doesn't come into contact with the flowers.

When working with cut flowers, it's important to remember that they have been removed from their only source of energy and water. When plants are cut or damaged in any way, the plant will immediately begin to seal off the wound in order to prevent any bacteria or fungus from infecting the whole plant. In cut flowers, this seals off the xylem and the phloem, which are the tube like structures in stems that move water and sugars through the plant. When you first receive a bouquet, you should always cut off the bottom inch of stem with a knife or a pair of shears. Scissors should not be used because they will crush the xylem and phloem, restricting their ability to take up water. When re-cutting the stems, it is best to cut them at a forty-five degree angle. This is because it exposes more surface area than a straight across cut, allowing the stem to take up more water. After re-cutting the stems, they should immediately be put into warm water, because warm water is taken up more easily by stems than cold water. Many florists include a packet to put into the water to help with the longevity of the flowers. These should be used according to the directions on the packet. The water in the vase should be checked often, refilled if needed, and replaced when it becomes cloudy.

If you are going to be storing your flowers before giving them to someone, or using them, such as in a wedding, flowers should be stored at cool temperatures, but above freezing. If plant material is allowed to freeze, it will quickly break down upon thawing as a result of the ice crystals that form. A home refrigerator would work great, but make sure that there isn't other plant material in the refrigerator, such as apples or bananas. These produce a plant hormone called ethylene, which causes fruit to ripen faster, and flowers will react to the presence of this hormone by going through their natural life cycle faster, shortening the life of the flowers significantly.

Whether you buy flowers for yourself or for others, there are a few easy ways to increase the longevity of the flowers. The first step is to buy flowers that are as fresh as possible. Before you put them in water, remove any leaves that will be below the water line. Next, cut the stems at a forty-five degree angle with a pair of shears or a knife so that it doesn't crush the structures that move water up the stem. When you put the plants in the water, it should be warm. Remember to check the water level often, and refill it before it is below the stems. Happy Valentine's Day to all! If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.