

Floral Refrigeration: Form, Function, Science and Sales

Proper fixtures maximize floral sales through quality, style and coolness.

BY TRISHA J. WOOLDRIDGE

When a store consults Floratech Industries, Syracuse, NY, about floral fixtures, Michael Wetzel, president, says Floratech asks: "What do you ideally want to do with your floral area? Where do you want to go?"

"Many factors will determine what kind, if any, refrigeration you will use in your floral department," explains Julie Anderson, project manager, Julie Anderson Consulting LLC, Albuquerque, NM. "The options of refrigeration units for floral units are considerable. You have open or closed, and they can be low or tall units. There is now a tall unit with a closed top for arrangements and an open bottom for bouquets. The sizes vary, too. There are small, auxiliary display 12-bucket units that are self-contained. Lots of options."

Wetzel, who looks for even more variety, specializes in custom systems. "Progressive chains are trying to make a unique image," he states. "They are trying to create an image and reduce cost, labor and shrink while driving merchandising system solutions for the store."

This leaves floral departments and purchasers with a near-limitless array of decisions. What are some things you should consider for your floral department?

"The worst thing to do is look at cost," notes Tom Lavagetto, president and owner of Floral Consulting Group, Spokane, WA. "First, look at the best size to fit the shop."

Marcy Britigan, president and owner, MEI, LaGrange Park, IL, agrees. "Space dictates overall physical dimensions. Selections can be made regarding open or closed units based on capacity."

Wetzel specifies, "[Floratech] takes a 'top



Photo courtesy of Floratech Industries

A floral refrigeration system often acts as a "silent salesman."

down' approach. We ask, 'Are you trying to make all floral in one area or in multiple areas?' Some stores have multiple entrances."

"Usually, if a department is up front, a low profile is preferred so customers can see through the store, and low, open coolers are used," cites Anderson as an example. "If there are walls, a tall unit can be used."

Wetzel denotes further considerations: "When you get into the department, is it staffed or not staffed? That affects the type of holding options. If you have labor cleaning and caring, you may have more vase options. If there's no staff, you might want to incorporate the wet-pack vases that the flowers come in in an attractive manner."

"Flexibility is very important," includes Britigan. "Cases need to be designed for merchandising flexibility. You should be able to reconfigure the unit easily to fit single stems or bouquets. Not all roses grow at

the same height. The fixture is a merchandising salesman — it's the silent salesman."

TEMPERATURE, HUMIDITY AND LIGHT

"There are many shapes and sizes, but attractiveness does not equal temperature and humidity control," stipulates Lavagetto. "It's important to make sure refrigeration units maintain the proper temperature and humidity."

"The ideal temperature is 35° to 40° [Fahrenheit]," says Wetzel. "The closer toward freezing the better. Tests show that even one day in refrigeration extends the life of the product in a consumer's home." (Editor's note: See *The Importance Of Temperature and Humidity* on page 104.)

On the other hand, MEI's Britigan points out a specific exception for tropical flowers, which, she says, should not be kept at such low temperatures.

Lavagetto agrees, "Tropicals should be kept in open air, with temperatures of 55° to 60° [Fahrenheit]."

MEI's Britigan has another caveat for floral departments: "Cooling without regard to humidity is not optimum, especially at retail where you are selling a processed product. Under refrigeration, flowers require no less than 80 percent and no more than 93 percent humidity."

Lighting is also vital to flowers. "Flowers are colorful, and it's often color that sells flowers. Lighting and color are everyday stuff. Attention to lighting is really, really important." Britigan notes

One selling point of Floratech's Wall of Color fixture is the lack of a ceiling so departments can use their own lighting. "A ceiling creates shadows, so you need to add lighting," Wetzell explains. Adding lighting to a fixture with a ceiling, he says, packs a "double whammy" because the lighting increases both electrical consumption and heat output upon the flowers — requiring more electricity to maintain temperature. Without a ceiling, the Wall of Color allows the store to "highlight from [the store's] ceiling," which allows distant, efficient lighting without creating extra shadows.

CLOSED DOOR OR OPEN?

Closed door and open door coolers each have pros and cons for retailers.

"Reach-in coolers [coolers with closed doors] enable the refrigeration system to maintain optimum temperature and relative humidity levels," states Britigan. "An open cooler with air curtain removes the barrier to customers, making product more available. However, an air curtain is not as effective as doors, so optimum temperature and humidity levels are difficult to achieve."

"Open air sells better than doors," Lavagetto's Lavagetto concurs, "but they don't cool as well, so there's a higher turnover rate. Humidity is also low because of the open air."

Amy Adams, floral manager at Lee's Marketplace, a 2-store operation based in Logan, UT, talks about her preferences. "I prefer a closed door because it does a better job. The air circles around." However, she notes, "Customers prefer [the open air cooler]. They tend to buy more. They seem to find the closed door intimidating."

"The door makes people think it's a display, not to buy," adds Lavagetto. "It's an extra step to get inside the cooler, and people love to touch and feel."

Anderson's Anderson agrees, "I have no articles to confirm, but it was always felt that open coolers are more customer friendly."

"You should have both," recommends

The Importance Of Temperature And Humidity

"The cold chain is very important and currently at the top of the list of industry hot topics," Marcy Britigan, president and owner, MEI, LaGrange Park, IL, explains. "Maintaining the cold chain from grower to store to consumer is critical so customers get the maximum value for their flowers."

Britigan shared information from the *Flower and Nursery Report* of the University of California Agricultural Extension Service on the effect of temperature on carnations:

Temperature Fahrenheit	How long flowers held up
50°	3 days
45°	4-5 days
35°	12-15 days
32°	30 days

Humidity also plays an important part in maintaining the quality and life of the flowers. She says temperature affects humidity and must be considered. "Regardless of the season, when you turn on the furnace or the A/C, you are conditioning the air, and, at the same time, removing humidity. Whether you heat or cool the air, you change the relative humidity. What is unique about flowers is that we need to cool them without removing humidity from the environment. Flowers want cold but they don't want to dry out."

"The temperature differential [TD] is the difference between the box temperature [inside the unit] and coil temperature. The higher the TD, the lower the relative humidity. Commercial food and beverage coolers will easily pull temperatures down to 34° F, but the TD is usually 12° to 15°, creating a cool, dry environment — often as low as 60 percent relative humidity," she continues.

The optimum temperature for flowers at retail level should be between 34° and 36° F, and the relative humidity should be between 80 percent and 90 percent. "If the temperature climbs even 10 degrees above the optimum and/or the relative humidity drops as much as 20 percent below the optimum," Britigan concludes, "you're literally sucking the life and value out of the flowers."

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Lavagetto, "and display some in outside air altogether."

"Retailers choose one or the other or both, based on merchandising," Britigan explains. "Some stores have a combination of both: closed units for premium or more sensitive product and open ones for cash-and-carry bouquets and less sensitive flowers. That way you get the best of both worlds."

According to Adams, "We maximize on both." Lee's has a closed-door unit in the back for free stems that the department uses. "That maximizes space with shelving units," she explains, noting it protects flowers from being out in the open and being gone through by customers. The store also has an open-air unit in the front. "It's five feet long and five feet tall and holds five buckets. You can put four to eight bouquets in it and merchandise quite a bit."

COMBINATIONS AND OTHER ALTERNATIVES

Lavagetto suggests combination units.

"The bottom is open air and the top is doors for arrangements. The concept is good."

On the other hand, Wetzell says Floratech is going in a different direction. "Thinking about doors or no doors is old thinking. We're really not about open and closed cases. We are developing something unique for the department."

He believes floral is one area of the store that can make strategic considerations to differentiate and stand out from competitors. "[One client] wanted a layout that curves because when people are walking an outside curve, they tend to follow the curve. With their curve display, customers follow the display into the middle of the department," he elaborates.

Lavagetto has another merchandising concept to offer. "Fresh flowers should be date-coded. If you're selling freshness, it ensures the store is giving the optimum value." He sums things up by stating if a store is spending money on "high-end, quality flowers but not the refrigeration unit, it is selling itself short."

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