



ISSN: 2663-6050

Stocking the shop: Nineteenth-Century flower buying

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Received: March 03, 2020
Revised: March 13, 2020
Accepted: March 24, 2020
Published: March 26, 2020

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ABSTRACT

In the third quarter of the 19th century, urban florists purchased a wide variety of cut flowers for resale. Roses and carnations were staples, and the season dictated market availability. In London, the expansion of Covent Garden in 1870 facilitated the importation of flowers from all over Europe. New York florists began to purchase flowers through wholesalers who carried stock grown in state and nearby, which was transported by train to the city and distributed to approximately 200 florist shops at the turn of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS: Victorian, cut flowers, 19th century, florist

INTRODUCTION

Today's retail florists can purchase and resell a wide range of flowers and plants due to advances in floriculture technology, transportation and communication. In the first half of the 19th century, florists produced much of what they sold. A typical florist operation at that time resembled today's garden center. Greenhouses and outdoor beds produced flowers, nursery stock, and bedding plants, and the associated store sold potted plants, bulbs and seeds.

In the second half of the 19th century, when retail floristry as we know it today was in its infancy, urban florists shifted the model. Real estate prices were climbing in the city, increasing the cost of cut flower production. Customers' tastes and demands required more time to prepare, sell and deliver arrangements, creating a specialized trade [1]. In turn, these changes increased sales from bulk cut flower markets and gave rise to floral wholesalers. This paper highlights primary source floriculture data from New York and London in the third quarter of the 19th century. Also, it sheds light on how florists purchased flowers and what types of flowers were available at the market.

What Flowers did Victorian Era Florists Purchase?

The period from 1860-1890 saw an increase in consumer demand for flowers linked to the expansion of the middle class. Floriculture producers sought to meet their needs with a wide variety of cut flowers and potted plants. Greenhouse-grown roses and carnations were staples in Victorian-era flower shops. Consumers could enjoy floral designs made from rose cultivars including those listed in Table 1 and carnations in Table 2 [2].

Cut roses retailed from 0.10 to 0.25 cents a stem, as much as 0.75 each during the winter [3]. Fashions rose and declined; such was the case with commercially grown rose varieties. Those listed in Table 1 were superseded by the end of the century [4]. Not only were cultivars obsolete, but entire genera faded from use. Camellias, which had been popular in mid-century hand-held bouquets and headdresses, fell from use by the 1890s.

Beyond the staple flowers, other types of flowers were grown and sold, depending on the season. The ability to force flowers such as chrysanthemums off-season had not yet been discovered, hence they were sold only in the fall [5]. Table 3 provides a sample of flowers, listed by common name, sold by the Buffalo, NY retailer Long Brothers [6].

Care and Handling

Since the science of postharvest care and handling of cut flowers was not yet known, flowers senesced sooner than today's crops. Florists gauged vase life by hours and days and discovered longevity improvements through observation and practice. They found flowers harvested at the end of the day had a longer life than those cut in midday heat [7]. Some observed that harvested plant materials gained display time when initially floated in water [8], harvested using sharp knives rather than scissors [9]; and periodically recut while on display in the shop or in a vase arrangement. [10]. Vase water with a few drops of ammonia [11] or camphor oil [12] had beneficial effects on longevity. So did the use of a drop of gum adhesive, made from alcohol and tree resins, on the back of geranium and shatter-prone flowers to keep them intact and usable. [13,14,15]. It was advised to avoid displays of cut flowers in tobacco-smoke-filled rooms and rooms with dying flowers. [16]

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Table 1: Popular rose cultivars in New York, circa 1880

<i>Rosa</i> sp. Cultivar	Color
'Bon Silene'	Pinkish red
'Cornelia Cook'	Creamy white
'Douglas'	Bright red
'Duchess de Brabant'	Light pink
'General Jacqueminot'	Red
'Isabella Sprunt'	Bright yellow
'Marechal Neil'	Golden yellow
'Niphetos'	White
'Perle des Jardin'	Bright to creamy yellow
'Safrano'	Apricot to yellow bud; cream open

Table 2: Popular carnation cultivars in New York, circa 1880

<i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i> Cultivar	Color
'Astoria'	Yellow
'De Fontain'	Yellow
'Flatbush'	White
'La Purite'	Red
'Peerless'	White
'President de Grauw'	White
'Snowdon'	White

Table 3: List of flowers, sold by the Buffalo, NY retailer Long Brothers

Month(s)	Cut Flowers
January	alyssum, bouvardia, camellia, carnation, heliotrope, roman hyacinth, stevia, violets
February	January's flowers and hyacinth, lily of the valley, rose, tulip
March-April	alyssum, calla lily, carnation, eupatorium, hyacinth, lily, lily of the valley, myosotis, oxeve daisy, primrose, rose, tulip, violets
May-June	calla lily, carnation, daisy, gladiola, lily, mignonette, pansy, phlox, rose, spiraea, stevia, stock, sweet pea, tulip
July-September	candytuft, carnation, gladiola, mignonette, phlox, rose, sweet pea, tuberose
October-November	carnation, chrysanthemum, gladiola, rose, stevia, tuberose

Two Major Markets

London's Covent Garden, first decreed a plaza marketplace in 1670 [17], was a major center for floral commerce in the 1800s. In the 1860s, flower buyers found the market stocked with flowers, plants and ornamental branches grown in nurseries or harvested from countryside towns such as Tottenham, Battersea, Fulham, Edmonton and Chiswick. Deliveries from these sources were made on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and florists knew that Mondays were often the worst for flower buying because the stock was left from the previous week [18]. A florist could count upon three full-time vendors of floral products, year 'round, provided by Messrs. Buck, Dickson and Baker. These and other market sellers sold a variety of cut flowers and foliage based upon availability, including anemones, azaleas, camellias, carnations, china asters, Chinese primroses (potted), dahlias, delphinium, double narcissus, geraniums, iris, lily of the valley, moss roses, nemophilas, pansies, peonies, pinks, poinsettias, primroses, violets, and water lilies.

About 20 years later, florists found significant improvements in Covent Garden, with a new building nearly 1 million square feet hosting 270 stalls. The market opened at 4:00 a.m. in the summer, 5:00 a.m. in the winter, and closed around 9:00 a.m. daily. Domestically grown floral products were supplemented with quality imports from France, Holland, Belgium and other European countries. The most popular roses were 'Niphetos' and 'Isabella Sprunt', mirroring contemporary trends in New York [19].

Toward the end of the 19th century, the prevailing method for bulk flower buying was through brokers, middlemen who earned sales commissions from the growers they represented. New York florists, approximately 200 strong by 1895, had the option to buy from the New York Cut Flower Company, one of the first wholesale florists. The floral stock was purchased from approximately 50 different growers in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Rhode Island who boxed and shipped it by rail directly to the wholesaler [20]. Flowers were packed in wooden boxes reinforced with zinc corners or paper mache reinforced with iron fittings, five feet long by six inches deep. Once emptied, the boxes were sent back to the growers for no extra charge. New stock was sold on the sales floor or kept in their 5,000 cubic foot refrigerator. Busy flower shops kept at least \$50 worth of cut flower inventory daily and discarded up to half of it before stems were sold.

DISCUSSION

It is important for floristry teachers and students to be familiar with the history of the industry, including past crops and buying habits. This keeps the vintage materials in mind for projects and events in classes and professional work.

The historical record documents increased cut flower consumption via retail and wholesale markets, and widespread distribution of packaged flowers by train in the last half of the 19th century. These changes ultimately made retailing flowers more streamlined and helped florists keep up with consumers' tastes. In Victorian times, as today, the use of common names was problematic due to their links to multiple and varying genera (daisy) and species (lily). Another challenge to our understanding was the change in the way flowers were used. A variety that might have been considered a cut flower in the 19th century is now commonly used as a potted plant (primrose) or bedding plant (alyssum, pansy).

Advances in postharvest science have combatted difficulties in marketing and selling flowers and early florists were on course in adaptation. Today's treatments resisting the effects of ethylene, microbial growth and subsequent blockages, and suberin production counter otherwise short vase life and help boost value. New, longer-lasting varieties are purchased online, shipped in recyclable boxes, kept cool and processed in flower food without the need to recut stems. Commercial forcing technology allows flowers to be available throughout the year, while shipping by air delivers contra-seasonal flowers across the hemisphere.

The resurgence of close-to-market cut flower farms is reminiscent of 19th century practices and strengthened by advances in floriculture science, production information and telecommunications. Small, local growers can adapt quickly to market changes and cater to the needs of nearby retail florists.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Funding for this research was provided by the AIFD Foundation.

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