



ROYAL LINEAGE

Feed alstroemeria, named after a baron, the right food and it will reward you with regal vase life.

ALSTROEMERIA: A VERSATILE AND ENDURING FLOWER

> Were you pushing posies in 1978? Back then, I was selling roses, poms, iris and carnations out of a stall in the San Francisco Flower Market, flanked by a cut foliage vendor on one side, and a guy growing 'Killian' and 'Majestic' daisies on the other. The daisy grower also produced a bloom I'd never seen before: Peruvian lilies. It took me more than a few queries to lock-in on the botanical name, alstroemeria, which sounded as exotic as the flowers looked: succulent stems that terminate in umbel-shaped support structures (think: upside down umbrella) carrying a mass of colorful florets.

An Exotic Beginning

The Swedish baron, Clas Alströmer, collected alstroemeria seeds on a trip to South America in 1753, and was subsequently honored when his close friend, Carolus Linnaeus, named the plant family after him. Today, alstroemeria is vegetatively propagated by rhizomes, root structures that form a crown.

Fast-forward 20 years, add the magic of plant breeding where crosses have been made between species from Chile (winter-growing) and Brazil (summer-growing), and you have evergreen plants that provide flowers year-round. According to Web research, this breeding work derives mainly from trials that began in the U.S. in the 1980s. Today we have a plethora of beautiful alstroemeria varieties appropriate for everyday bouquet combinations, as well as high-style arrangements.

Modern alstroemeria varieties offer stems with strong, long pedicels supporting terminal florets, which come in color palettes ranging from neon to pastel. Petal patterns include intriguing stripes and robust flecks. Some varieties have distinct patches of pink, reminiscent of the flushed cheeks of children at play. Umbels can carry 10 or more florets per stem. Stems vary in length from short garden varieties around 12 inches, up to greenhouse-grown plants of 5 feet or more. A telltale trait of all relatives in the Alstroemeria family is resupinate leaves that twist from the base, so what appears as the upper surface is actually the lower leaf surface. Because alstroemeria is ethylene sensitive, growers treat it with STS immediately after harvest. STS protects the flowers from damage of ethylene gas exposure that causes transparent flower petals, loss of color vibrancy and short vase life.

Foliage Foible

Alstroemeria blooms are showy, intriguing, easy to care for and, perhaps best of all, long-lived. A vase life of 12 to 16 days is not unusual for these beauties. Their down side: foliage can be wimpy. Though resupinate leaves have a cool, intriguing structure, they tend to turn yellow quickly in the vase. Why? Alstroemeria, like many "bulbous" flowers, suffers an imbalance of hormones when flowers are harvested. A symptom of this imbalance: leaves that turn yellow far ahead of bloom opening. Is there a cure? Yes!

Growers, wholesalers and retailers can rebalance cell chemistry by treating alstroemeria with a food specially formulated for bulb flowers. Chrysal's formula is called Bulb T-bags. Floralife's bulb food is a powder sold in small pails that include a scoop.

Branded Beauties

The latest trend in alstroemeria marketing programs among Colombian growers is creating brand awareness. The brand's unique selling points are developed through rigorous selection processes during grading to weed out all but the top quality blooms, specific postharvest treatments, grading protocols and careful handling procedures. Look for more information on branded alstroemeria during 2012 trade shows and advertisements in trade magazines. I feel confident these varieties will be among the entries in the 2012 Outstanding Varieties Competition next September in Palm Beach, Fla., at SAF's 128th annual convention. 🌸

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