

A Primer for the Eco-Friendly Florist

Research indicates that consumers appreciate florists who are environmentally conscious. They want to buy from them, and they are willing to pay up to 10 percent more for floral designs from those shops. This publication can help florists become more eco-friendly by explaining terms and techniques they can use in their day-to-day operations.

These practices go beyond sustainability—they also save money and time and have positive impacts on the entire floral industry. Florist business owners, managers, designers, teachers, and students should incorporate environmental consciousness into their business models and work.

The Five R's

A first step toward building a more environmentally conscious business model is to understand the Five R's.

1. **Reduce:** Buy and use only what you need.
2. **Refuse:** Say no to single-use items in your business when possible.
3. **Repurpose:** Continually transition materials from one use to another.
4. **Recycle:** Do not discard cardboard, glass, and aluminum with the garbage.
5. **Reuse:** Avoid throwing out perfectly good materials.

Reduce

Locally grown flowers and foliage have shorter transportation distances and require less fuel to reach market than imported flowers. Search for, build relationships with, and support local farmers.

Continually eliminate single-use plastics in your business by purchasing fewer of these products. Over time, you will not miss them.

Use less floral foam in your designs. Instead of an entire brick, consider whether the design can be successfully made using only half a brick or less. Floral foam is non-compostable and ends up in landfills.

Purchase and use plant materials that retain their appeal after drying. For example, *Craspedia globosa* (Billy

buttons) are popular with customers in both their fresh and dried states.

Create and sell designs where every floral placement is visible. Hidden flowers cannot be appreciated, and overstuffed designs are not profitable for the business or affordable for the customer.

Compost green waste to significantly reduce the amount of trash hauled to landfills and, in turn, the methane released into the atmosphere. To learn more, see MSU Extension Publication 1782 *Composting for the Mississippi Gardener* online at extension.msstate.edu.

Rent wedding props rather than buying materials that you may not use frequently.

Instead of using plastic and floral-foam wreaths, opt for a compostable base made of straw, grapevine, smilax, or Elaeagnus, and use line flowers (such as larkspur, liatris, or flowering branches) to extend the arrangement's size.

Analyze where you can consume less paper, including purchasing, invoicing, and packaging.

Consider the short display time of sympathy and event flowers. Do not overcompensate for freshness by using plastic-based mechanics. Remember that some displays need only last for hours, not days.

Refuse

Try to refuse single-use plastic bags, floral containers and supplies, and food containers and utensils. Ask product providers to consider compostable packaging, like paper sleeves or compostable take-out containers.

Repurpose

Sometimes called "upcycling," take a creative stance and repurpose something you have on hand rather than purchasing something new. Look at showroom stands and shelving, and consider using them for events, weddings, and memorial service rentals.

Polystyrene packing materials can be repurposed into floral design mechanics. Previously used smilax can be

fully defoliated, leaving a decorative vine for reuse as a design element or a compostable mechanic.

Recycle

If there is no recycling facility nearby, avoid single-use materials and compost as much cardboard as possible.

Aluminum cans are better choices for drink packaging than plastic bottles. Recycle used aluminum cans, or collect and donate them to pickers so that they do not have to comb through trash cans and dumpsters.

Reuse

Better-quality vases and floral containers tend to be reused rather than discarded by consumers.

Terry cloth rags can be laundered and reused, limiting the amount of paper towels used in the shop.

Quality flowers and durable foliage from weddings and events can be reclaimed, reused, and composted.

Rather than dumping plastic containers from events, sanitize and reuse them.

Use old bed sheets as drop cloths when installing wedding and event flowers. When the design is completed, roll it up and place it in the delivery vehicle. Once you're back at the store, compost the green waste.

Keep a cut flower shipping box in your vehicle as a storage/delivery aid.

Accept donations of used vases and floral containers. Clean them and feature them in the store.

Give unused floral supplies and props to an emerging florist or floral school. This could be a tax benefit as well.

Create event and church arrangements using chicken wire as a mechanic. Collect the spent design and sanitize and reuse the mechanic.

Did you know that fresh floral foam can be frozen and reused? If the foam stays moist after its use, pack it in plastic bags and store it in the freezer. Thaw it at room temperature by free-floating it in fresh flower food solution, then add flowers. This can be a practical and economical application for premium-priced wreath bases and caged foam products.

Recommendation: Reduce, refuse, repurpose, recycle, reuse!

Biodegradable and Compostable: What's the Difference?

Biodegradable materials are capable of being decomposed by bacteria or other living organisms and can become organic material.



Compostable materials are capable of biological decomposition in an aerated compost system or anaerobic digester, where the material becomes indistinguishable from its original form and breaks down into carbon dioxide, water, inorganic compounds, and biomass. Compostables may be made from paper or plant fibers, along with other ingredients, and may include items such as bags, food/floral containers, and floral supplies. Compostable products produce humus upon degradation, which is the richest and most important organic part of all soils. The high level of microbial activity in the humus boosts beneficial microbes within the soil.

Degradable materials break down into smaller components, leaving more than carbon dioxide, water, inorganic compounds, and biomass—including microplastics.

Microplastics are small plastic pieces less than 5 millimeters long that can be harmful to ocean and aquatic life.

Floral foam, plastic cages, and polystyrene products degrade but do **not** biodegrade.

The main differences between degradable products and compostable products are

- the materials that make up the product,
- how the product decomposes, and
- what is left after decomposition.

Recommendations: Seek, use, and compost biodegradable products. Avoid and limit plastics from daily use.

Methane Awareness

It is important to separate compostables from landfill waste. When plant materials are not separated from waste (garbage) and go to a landfill, they undergo an anaerobic decomposition process and produce **methane** that is released into the atmosphere. Methane is at least 28 times more effective than carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere.

Municipal solid waste landfills are the third-largest source of human-related methane emissions in the United States. Waste discarded in municipal solid waste landfills may contaminate groundwater, rivers, and

streams. Contaminants find their way into the food chain, reaching animals, including humans.

Recommendation: Start composting now and lower methane production from your trash.

Try Environmentally Friendly Mechanics

If you have not yet tried them, make a point of using biodegradable floral mechanics made from rock or plant fibers. They may cost more than phenolic floral foam, but consumers may place higher value on arrangements using them and may appreciate your products more than the competition's.

Basalt Mechanics

These floral mechanics are made from basalt rock that is pulverized, spun into wool, and then formed into bricks. The mechanic consists only of rock, so when it degrades, it becomes sand. It does not contain fiberglass, but it looks like rock wool used in insulation products. It degrades rather than biodegrades.

Natural Plant Fiber Mechanics

These mechanics are made from coconut and/or other natural plant fibers. The material is sterile. You can arrange flowers in it or plant cuttings into it that can set roots. It biodegrades and can be composted.

Stems and Vines

Include plant materials such as curly willow or smilax stems in the store's floral design mechanic repertoire. Simply wad up and stuff willow stems into a container to create a durable network to secure flower stems in place. Other stems and vines can be used successfully—just be sure to remove any foliage that may fall below the water line.

Recommendation: Try eco-friendly mechanics.

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By **James DelPrince**, PhD, CFD, AIFD, Associate Extension Professor, Coastal Research and Extension Center; **Elizabeth Englebretson**, Extension Associate II, Coastal and Marine Extension Program; **Cole Etheredge**, PhD, CFD, Associate Professor, Plant and Soil Sciences; **Hitomi Gilliam**, CFD, AIFD, Design 358, Bowen Island, British Columbia, Canada; and **Patricia Knight**, PhD, Director of Coastal Horticulture Research, Coastal Research and Extension Center, South Mississippi Branch Experiment Station.

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