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Flowers for Funerals - They Are Important

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Results of a study entitled, "The Role of Flowers and Plants in the Bereavement Process," has substantiated the value of flowers and plants during this experience in people's lives. The American Floral Endowment jointly funded this project with the SAF Florist Information Committee.

The floral industry has the opportunity to use information gained from this research to develop a positive educational program for funeral directors, grief therapists, and particularly the public, on the importance of flowers and plants during the time of bereavement.

The work adds to the bank of scientific study conducted previously, through Endowment grants, on the value of flowers and plants in other areas of human behavior.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was twofold:

- To understand the value and role of flowers and plants in the funeral service and bereavement process.
- To determine who sends flowers, when flowers are sent, why flowers are sent. Determining why flowers are sent, including the perceived value of sending and receiving flowers was a critical objective.

To achieve these objectives, funeral directors, grief therapists, consumers, and individuals, who had lost a loved one in the past one to five years, were surveyed. Focus group interviews were also conducted.

Although the florist industry is seeing a decline in sympathy flower sales, the great majority of bereaved (93 percent) and consumers (85 percent) have sent flowers as a sympathy gift at least once. Most often, flowers are sent immediately after notification of death.

The results from these studies confirm what has been assumed - flowers are sent as an expression of sympathy. Fifty six percent of the funeral directors think flowers are an expression of sympathy for the family, 85 percent of the consumers said flowers are sent to comfort the survivors, and 82 percent of the bereaved agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "sending flowers is a way I show someone I care." The giving of flowers symbolizes the love, care, and concern for the survivors.

The results from all of the surveys and interviews indicate flowers continue to be an important part of the funeral ritual. The majority of funeral directors surveyed said they did not like doing funerals without flowers because the setting was so cold. Eighty percent of the grief therapists surveyed think receiving flowers is an aid in the grieving process. Fifty-one percent of the bereaved agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "flowers" are a critical component of the funeral ritual."

The bereaved were asked how much various rituals associated with death and funerals helped with grief. Eighty-three percent said family and friends helped a great deal, 60 percent said receiving sympathy cards, 54 percent said receiving sympathy flowers, 46 percent said receiving food, and 49 percent said receiving notice of memorial donations.

Findings

The first aspect of the study was directed toward understanding the value and role of flowers and plants in the funeral service and bereavement process. Results indicate that professionals, such as grief therapists and funeral directors, believe the rituals surrounding the funeral (including the sending and receiving of flowers and plants) are an aid in the grieving process. Individuals interviewed in the focus groups likewise targeted the value of flowers.

As would be expected, 99 percent of the grief therapists surveyed think the rituals surrounding the death and



funeral are an aid in the grieving process. Eighty percent of those surveyed think receiving flowers is an aid.

When funeral directors were asked to rank seven items often associated with funerals according to the comfort they provided the bereaved, flowers and plants ranked 4th after friends, funeral directors, and clergy. However, flowers were ranked ahead of sympathy cards and food.

Two general themes or ideas repeatedly were brought forward concerning the role of flowers in the funeral:

- Flowers are associated with the emotional side of death and funerals.
- Flowers play a functional role during the funeral.

Flowers play an important role in helping the bereaved deal with their grief. The respondents in the nationwide study answered the questions regarding many of the rituals associated with death and funerals and how effective they were as an aid in working through grief. Family and friends were by far the most helped for the bereaved. Eighty-three percent of the respondents said family and friends helped a great deal with their grief. However, receiving sympathy flowers ranked 2nd when compared to receiving sympathy cards, food, and memorial donations (Table 1).

Receiving sympathy cards	60.3%
Receiving sympathy flowers	53.9%
Receiving notice of memorial donations	49.3%
Receiving food	46.1%

An important role of flowers at the funeral service is providing comfort and warmth. In response to the request to indicate the one item which best defines the meaning or value of flowers and plants in the funeral service to themselves as funeral directors, 29 percent marked "provide comfort and warmth to the funeral setting." This was second only to serving as an expression of sympathy (40 percent). Response from the national survey of bereaved supports the importance of this role. Sixty percent agreed with the statement "flowers at the funeral make me feel good" and 69 percent agreed "flowers at the funeral give me a warm feeling."

The functional role of flowers in the funeral includes brightening up a somber environment and providing a diversion - something to talk about or do - during the visitation. The great majority in the nationwide survey (77 percent) felt flowers at the funeral brighten up the somber environment of the funeral home. Eighty percent agreed that looking at the cards to see who sent the flowers was a comfort to them. A majority (53 percent) agreed the flowers and plants provided something to talk about during the visitation.

Flowers also play a functional role after the funeral. Flowering and foliage plants appear to be more than a keepsake from the funeral; they are a living memorial to the deceased. It was repeatedly mentioned during the studies that flowering and foliage plants were taken home by the family after the funeral. All of the funeral directors agreed that members of the family took home flowers or plants. They indicated the most likely items to be taken were flowering and green foliage plants (65 percent) and small floral displays (25 percent). People who have been recently bereaved substantiated this preference for live plants. Focus group participants spoke of the importance of taking home live plants. Fifty-three percent of the respondents to the national survey agreed with the statement "I prefer giving live plants, bulbs, or seeds as a memorial for the deceased rather than a cut flower arrangement."

In addition to the emotional and functional roles of flowers, this study identified some interesting observations regarding the selection and use of flowers:

Although a great majority think that flowers are sent for the survivors, they also think the flowers should reflect something of the deceased person's life. While 30 percent in the national survey agreed flowers were sent "for the deceased", 55 percent disagreed. In addition, 75 percent agreed the flowers are sent "for the survivors". Regardless of for whom the flowers are sent, 50 percent of the bereaved respondents agreed with the idea that the sympathy flowers should include the deceased person's favorite flowers, and 35 percent had no opinion.

Most people do not associate the death of their loved ones with the death of a flower. An argument presented during the focus group interviews concerning why cut flowers were not appropriate for the funeral was that when the flowers died the bereaved would experience the death all over again. Of those responding to the national survey, 70 percent disagreed with this idea and 15 percent agreed. Another statement to evaluate this idea was

"the flowers from the arrangements will die just as my grief will subside." Forty-four percent agreed and 34 percent disagreed.

The second aspect of the study was to determine who sends flowers, when flowers are sent, and why flowers are sent.

Why send flowers?

Ninety-three percent of the respondents to the national survey of bereaved and 85 percent of the consumers have sent flowers as a sympathy gift at least once. When asked who flowers were sent to or received from, the majority selected close friends or family members. Responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Percent of respondents from a consumer survey to the question "Whom have you received flowers from or sent flowers to as a sympathy gift?"

	Received From	Sent To
Close friends	55.8%	62.8%
Close family members	43.2%	61.6%
Business associates/acquaintances	42.5%	30.4%
Other relatives	34.2%	44.5%
Neighbor	30.4%	33.9%
Church members	20.6%	16.3%

When are flowers sent?

The great majority of consumers surveyed (93 percent) reported sending flowers immediately after notification of the death, 4.9 percent sent them after the funeral service, and 1.2 percent sent them weeks or months after the death or to recognize the anniversary of the death. During the focus group interviews, several people mentioned they received a lot of support the week of the death and funeral and very little the weeks and months after the death. They said receiving flowers and a short note saying they are being thought of would have helped in the months after the funeral. Some people also mentioned they would like receiving flowers on the anniversary of the death.

Why do people send flowers?

People associate the giving of flowers with the expression of love, care, and concern, Eighty-two percent of the respondents to the national survey agreed with the statement "sending flowers is a way I show someone I care." Eighty-seven percent agreed flowers symbolize the love and care of others. In response to the statement that flowers and plants are a thoughtful expression of concern for the survivors, 81 percent agreed.

Flowers provide a tangible way for people to show their concern for the bereaved. Respondents to the national survey were asked to consider the most recent occasion for which they sent sympathy flowers and to indicate their primary reason. Table 3 shows these results.

Table 3.
Percent of respondents to a national survey of bereaved and a consumer survey to the question "Why did you send flowers or plants as a sympathy gift?"

	Bereaved*	Consumers**
To comfort the survivors	50.8%	84.5%
Respect for the deceased	28.6%	51.2%
It is socially expected	7.5%	13.7%
To comfort me in my grief	6.1%	8.2%

*respondents selected the single best answer.
**respondents marked all answers that applied.

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