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Petal power

Valentine's Day flowers still the preferred gift

By Andrea Coombes, CBS.MarketWatch.com
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SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) – This week Americans will spend millions of dollars for Valentine's Day flowers, but they may not realize the full benefit of doing so.

We tend to think of flowers as just one form of Valentine's Day affection – equal, on the scale of love offerings, to candies and other special gifts.

But blooms make more people happier for a longer period of time than fruit baskets, deluxe candles, pen sets or other gifts of equal value, said Dr. Jeannette Haviland-Jones, psychology professor at Rutgers University, who has researched flowers' effect on happiness for four years.

Initially, she expected flowers to invoke the same degree of happiness as comparable gifts, but "it keeps turning up that the flowers have a very powerful effect," she said.

Her results illuminate why Americans bought about 156 million roses last year for Valentine's Day, and why the cut-flower industry garners \$8 billion in annual sales, according to statistics from the Society of American Florists, an industry trade group.

Have flower, will talk

For instance, giving flowers leads people to overcome traditional "elevator behavior" – staying in the corner and avoiding eye contact – an effect other gifts don't share.

"If you handed them a flower, everything changed, for men and women. They smile, they look at you, they initiate a conversation, they move out of the corner," Haviland-Jones said.

Another test gauged subjects' moods before and after receiving a gift. "Only the people who got flowers were less depressed two or three days later," she said.

One study measured the smile factor. Those who received flowers exhibited the strongest response. "Everybody got a \$50 gift. They were all quite lovely. All wrapped by the same florist, equally colorful and aromatic. The flowers won out," she said.

The recurring positive response to flowers is equal to the sure-fire negative response elicited by dropping snakes on people. You can "always count on a startle response," Haviland-Jones said.

Other research has shown one can condition people to be afraid of almost anything, even bunny rabbits, but scientists are unable to make people fearful of flowers.

Happiness doesn't come cheaply

Of course, giving flowers on Valentine's Day will cost more than some other gifts: About \$80 to \$90 for delivery of a dozen long-stemmed roses.

Still, that won't stop most shoppers: The average consumer plans to spend \$99.24 this Valentine's Day, up from \$80.44 last year. Overall, consumers will spend \$12.8 billion on V-Day gifts this year, according to a survey of about 8,600 consumers by BIGresearch for the National Retail Federation.

But more plan to buy candy than flowers: 53 percent have sweets in mind, versus about 39 percent who'll opt for sweet-smelling blooms, according to the survey.

Most of the flower buyers will be men: 65 percent of men plan to buy blooms versus 16 percent of women.

More women might want to consider buying flowers for men though, Haviland-Jones said. Men she's spoken with, from construction workers to academics, appreciate receiving flowers.

Let the florist know the bouquet is for a man, she said, for the best male-friendly design, and be warned that some people, men and women, don't appreciate receiving flowers at work.

Not just Saturday this year

For florists and delivery services such as FTD ([FTD! news, chart, profile](#)), 1-800-Flowers.com ([FLWS: news, chart, profile](#)) and Teleflora, Valentine's Day is the biggest delivery day of the year.

That's not driven solely by the traditional romance-inspired purchase: 69 percent of consumers plan to buy gifts for children and parents, and 25 percent plan to shop for friends and teachers, according to the National Retail Federation survey.

Even though Valentine's Day is Saturday, 65 percent of FTD florists expect Friday to be the busiest delivery day. "It's the 'wow' factor of receiving flowers in a public workplace," said Caroline Barni, an FTD spokeswoman.

Procrastinators are in luck: At FTD.com, flower-givers can order up until noon (in the recipient's time zone) on Feb. 14 for delivery that day.

Red roses for Easter?

Flowers weren't always a part of Valentine's Day, which Americans began celebrating in the early 1700s, according to the Census Bureau. Instead, the trend started in the late 1800s.

"Before flowers, the gifts of choice were 'very frilly, Victorian lacy valentines that were handmade," said Dianne Noland, a horticulturist and co-author of "A Centennial History of the American Florist."

Easter used to be the top floral holiday, she said.

But in 1897, Valentine's Day news reports said a flower trend was emerging. "It was a grassroots movement," Noland said. "It caught some of the florists off-guard right at the turn of the century."

By the early 1900s, florists launched advertising campaigns in the belief that "thousands will eschew the frilled paper monstrosities," according to an ad quoted in Noland's book.

Violets were the most popular Valentine's Day flower then, she said, but roses now reign, driven in part by greater availability through air transportation.

Most roses bought in the U.S. come from Colombia and Ecuador. Overall, about 70 percent of cut flowers bought in the U.S. each year are grown overseas.

Of cut flowers purchased for Valentine's Day, 57 percent are roses, 24 percent are mixed bouquets, 8 percent are carnations and 11 percent are other single-flower types, according to the Society of American Florists

based on 2003 buying patterns.

And when it's roses, they're usually red: 66 percent of roses purchased for the big day are red, 10 percent are mixed colors, 9 percent are pink, 5 percent are peach/salmon, 4 percent are yellow and 1 percent are white.

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