

CALIFORNIA FAVORITES Different waxflower varieties peak at different times all through the California season, says Diana Roy at Resendiz Brothers, a grower specializing in wax along with other flowers (www.resendizbrothers.com): "We start with some of the hybrids as early as December, and by the time we get to May or June the assortment has probably changed three or four times." Among the favorites are 'Madonna' and 'Revelation'—both hybrids that have been on the market for a while, but remain very popular. 'Majestic Pink' sports especially large blooms (as does its sister variety, 'Majestic White'). 'Romance' is intriguing because it offers mostly white and mostly pink flowers on the same stem. Like some other varieties, says Diana, "the longer you leave it on the bush, the more colorful it becomes." 'Purple Pride', for example: when it first starts to bloom, it's lighter, but the longer it's left on the bush, the deeper purple it becomes. Even some of the varieties of white eventually start to blush." The vase life is not affected by waiting longer to harvest, but most growers won't wait to let the color develop.

NEW FROM DOWN UNDER New waxflower hybrids from Helix, a division of Australian flower exporter Wafex, offer bigger, more densely clustered blooms that are more shatter-resistant than in the past. Some Helix hybrids are already being harvested in California as well as in Australia, South Africa, or wherever waxflower is grown; others are only just coming into production, or are as yet available only as imports. 'Chantilly Lace' is as dainty and white as the name suggests. 'Moonlight Delight', a blue-ribbon winner at the SAF Outstanding Varieties Competition, offers extra-large white flowers with a crimson center in early to mid spring; when the closed red buds are still present, they add to the appeal. 'My Sweet 16' begins as a mass of pure white flowers that mature to a rich red shade; in between, both white and red blooms may appear on the same stem. 'Sarah's Delight' is a vibrant pink with a crimson center; 'Strawberry Surprise' is a mid pink with a frilly appearance, like a semi-double. Of true doubles, there are only a handful of waxflower varieties; they include pink 'Dancing Queen' (not shown), with extra-long stems. More at www.helixaustralia.com.au and www.wafex.com.au.

also began to diversify into other Australian and South African native flowers like proteas, leucadendrons, and pincushions.

Waxflower harvest in California starts officially in January (sometimes earlier), but peaks February through early May. So, the two seasons for wax, north and south, overlap—but just barely, meaning there is extra demand for varieties that bloom early and late in the season, wherever they are grown.

A CHANGING MIX OF VARIETIES The mix of available varieties changes quite a bit over the course of the season. "We grow over 40 different varieties, but they peak at different times," says Dave Clark, director of sales and marketing at Kendall Farms in Fallbrook, California—the largest grower of waxflower in the U.S., with over 200 acres. "Some are the new hybrids, some are the old-school types. But it's only by growing different varieties that we're able to start shipping at the beginning of the year and go all the way to the middle of the year. If for purple wax we had only 'Purple Pride', for example, we'd be cutting it in March and April, and that would be it. But during the season, we'll always have some wax variety in purple, pink or white to satisfy designers' needs."

CONSIDER THE SOURCE Some wax varieties are grown worldwide, others are more strongly associated with certain countries. "California and Australia grow more of the newer hybrids," according to Steve Dionne. "Peru and Israel are much heavier to the standard varieties"—some of which ('Purple Pride', for example) retain an important niche in the market everywhere.

But when you compare the waxflower that comes from different countries, other factors also come into play. At Resendiz Brothers—another California grower specializing in wax along with proteas and other flowers—Diana Roy notes that "California bunches" have a reputation as thicker and taller than imports: "When you're shipping overseas, freight is expensive, so the growers will often cut stems shorter to save on freight." Import bunches average 24 inches

long and 300 to 350 grams in weight, she estimates, where California bunches are often 36 inches or longer and 400 to 500 grams. Also, some growers, when they harvest, are inclined to remove some of the laterals. At Resendiz Brothers, the laterals stay on the stem, for a fuller bunch.

LATERAL THINKING Those lateral stems are what make wax such a great value, whether you're making bouquets or arrangements, argues Steve Dionne. "If you're making bouquets, one stem gives you pretty solid coverage on the surface of the bouquet, with as many as three to six flowering laterals on top of the main stem. But if you're making arrangements in foam, you can clip those laterals off the main stem and use them that way. So you get a very high usage on a per stem basis. I think that's one reason people like waxflower so much."

TINTS AND TONES Another reason could be the colors: from white and cream to pinks and reds to lavenders and dark purple, as well as stunning two- and three-tone combinations. "There are no natural blues or greens, yellow or oranges," says Steve. "But waxflower takes a stem dye beautifully, so in the fall, my sales go crazy on fall-colored tinted wax: yellow, orange, red, bronze." And it's not only white wax that is tinted: "Our best-selling tint is called Aussie Gold," Steve explains. "They take 'Purple Pride', which is a plum purple with a white ring around the center, and they tint it with yellow dye. The purple takes up the yellow and turns a rich bronze, while the white ring in the center turns pure yellow, so you end up with a bronze bloom with a yellow ring in the middle." The dye doesn't affect the longevity of the bloom, according to Steve. "Fall-colored filler flowers are hard to come by," he adds, "so this is a very popular option."

NO BEARDS Sometimes, especially toward the end of the season, waxflower grows a "beard": the foliage grows an inch or two past the flowers, which gives a grassy effect not generally considered desirable. Warmer