

Before refrigerated trucks, flowers traveled by horse cart, train, ship and other available transport. Growers and sellers relied on short journeys, careful packing, water, shade and sometimes ice to keep blooms fresh.

Local flowers and horse carts

For much of the history of flower selling, a short journey was the simplest way to protect a bloom. Flowers grown near a town could be cut and carried to market by hand or loaded onto a cart. Sellers also bought flowers from nearby growers for use in bouquets and arrangements.

Cut flowers begin to lose water after harvest. A long trip in heat or sun could leave petals limp and stems dry, so the time between cutting and sale mattered. Keeping flowers in water and out of direct sun helped, though not every kind of flower could be handled in the same way.

Local supply had its limits. The flowers available depended on the season and on what could be grown nearby, including under glass where greenhouses were available.

Flowers on trains and ships

Railways made it possible to move flowers over longer distances and bring them to larger markets more quickly than a horse cart could. Flowers were packed for the journey and sent as freight or express shipments. At the destination, they still had to be collected and brought to the seller.

Ships also carried plants and flowers, although a long voyage posed a problem for delicate cut blooms. Living plants could be transported in containers with growing material, while cut flowers had a shorter useful life. The length of the journey and the conditions on board mattered.

Speed was only part of the challenge. Flowers had to be protected from crushing as well as heat and drying. A fast train could help, but rough handling or a long wait before delivery could still damage the cargo.

Keeping blooms cool and protected

Before mechanical refrigeration became common in road transport, ice was one way to provide cooling. Ice cooled railway cars were used to carry perishable goods, and flowers could benefit from cooler conditions during transport. Ice, however, had to be supplied and replenished, and cooling was not as easy to control as it is in modern refrigerated vehicles.

Growers and shippers also used boxes and wrapping to hold flowers in place. Some flowers could travel packed without water for a limited time, then have their stems recut and placed in water after arrival. Others needed more care because they wilted or bruised easily.

Timing remained important even with ice and careful packing. Flowers sent a long way needed to reach buyers with enough life left to be displayed and sold.

Questions about transporting flowers

Did all flowers travel in water?

No. Some cut flowers were packed without water for transport and put back in water after arrival. The method depended on the flower and the journey.

Were flowers always grown near the market?

No. Local growing was important, but trains and ships also allowed flowers and plants to reach more distant buyers.

A good companion read: how to send a surprise gift