

Floralife flower food born during the Great Depression

By JOHN S. NIBLOCK

Floralife, one of the world's first flower foods, was invented in a small greenhouse in a blue-collar suburb of Chicago at the tail end of the Great Depression. William J. Bussert, who grew roses in Maywood, IL, was looking for ways to solve a bent neck problem with his roses. He experimented with home remedies such as sugar, pennies, aspirin and 7UP, but was unhappy with the results.

He pulled into the project James Sykora Sr., who had a degree in agricultural chemistry from the University of Wisconsin and was general manager of his main customer, Amling, in nearby Melrose Park, IL. Mr. Sykora had helped

of "Little Women" with Katharine Hepburn, in a celebrity endorsement. To introduce the product to retailers, Mr. Sykora set up workshops at wholesale houses to train floral clerks to use the new product.

Floralife flower food was a hit and became the most widely used flower food in the nation. Today most bouquet-makers, wholesalers and retailers include a Floralife packet with all flowers they sell.

"This is especially true in supermarkets. In fact it is unusual nowadays not to get a packet with a flower purchase in a mass-market store," said Jim Daly, vice president and general manager of Floralife Inc. and also vice president of research and development for

Smithers-Oasis Co., in a phone interview with *The Produce News*.

Today, 61 years later, Floralife still is made from three main ingredients: a nutrient, a pH adjuster and a stem

unblocker to aid in the uptake of water. A nationwide study several years ago of product recognition in the floral industry ranked the Floralife second only to FTD. Another found Floralife accounts for about two-thirds of all cut-flower food sold in North America, Mr. Daly added.

Smithers-Oasis Co. bought Floralife Inc. in 2007 and now markets and distributes the entire Floralife line of post-harvest products in all its major worldwide markets. In addition to its main manufacturing plant at its headquarters in Walterboro, SC, Floralife Inc. now has plants in major cut-

Floralife exhibits at the Chicago World Fair in 1932.

The two men set up a lab in an Amling building and came up with a 5-cent powder capsule that users stirred into a sugar

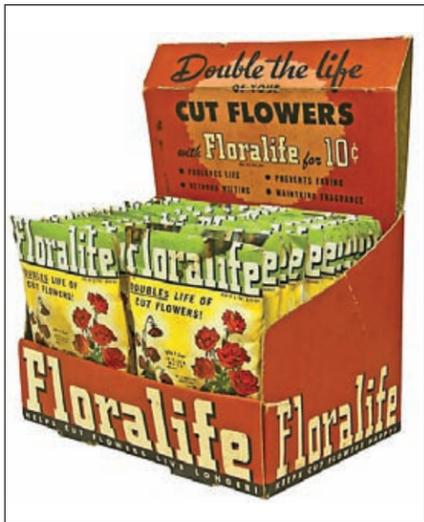
solution. Mr. Sykora distributed and promoted this new product, for which Mr. Bussert held the patent.

Unfortunately, when World War II broke out, sugar was rationed and the product was taken off the market. It was reintroduced in 1944.

Mr. Sykora used advertising techniques uncommon in the floral industry of the 1940s.

One ad showed a bunch of drooping roses "without Floralife" next to a bunch of perky ones "with Floralife."

Another featured a classic Hollywood actress of the 1930s and 1940s, Joan Bennett, who appeared in the 1933 version



A vintage Floralife display box.



James Sykora Jr. shows off his wares in the firm's Chicago-area facility in this photo probably taken in the 1960s. (Photos courtesy of Floralife Inc.)

flower growing countries and customizes its products to reflect regional growing conditions and varying water quality.

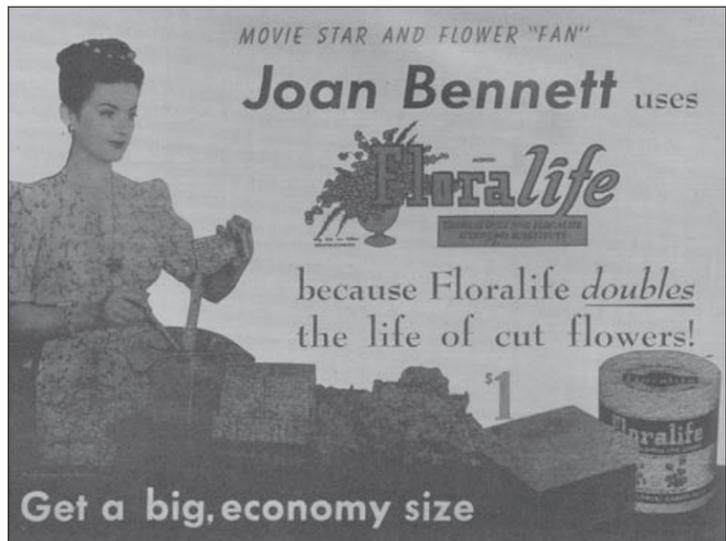
Those home remedies such as pennies in the water, sugar, 7UP, or bleach? Still around, said Carol Schram, marketing

manager at Floralife.

"We get asked about those a lot, but anyone who tries those substitutes and compares them to Floralife flower food becomes a believer," Ms. Schram said.

James Sykora Sr. went on to

become president of the Society of American Florists and was named posthumously to its Hall of Fame in 1963. In the 1950s he was succeeded at the helm of Floralife by his son, James Sykora Jr., who retired in 2006 and died in 2009.



20th Century Fox movie star and 'flower fan' Joan Bennett starred in this Floralife flower food ad in 1947, when celebrity endorsements were uncommon in the floral industry.

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