

5 things you need to know about

Buying flowers online

1. Check the company's website to see how it sends the flowers. Are they in a vase or are they boxed? "Flowers sent through a local florist typically arrive professionally designed in a vase or container, ready to be displayed," says Jennifer Sparks, vice president of marketing for the Society of American Florists. "Flowers sent through a grower or distribution center usually arrive in a box and must be set up by the recipient."

2. Beware of "order gatherers" -- companies that take orders through the Internet, pocket a commission and pass on the remaining money to a local florist to fill the order, says Amy Stewart, author of "Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers." "Consumers receive less than what they pay for and have little recourse for resolving problems. Order gatherers appear to be local but are based somewhere else. If in doubt, call them to find out." If you want to buy online but still support a local business, then try FlowerShopNetwork.com or B. Brooks Fine Flowers (bbrooks.com), two online networks of local florists.

3. Select "green" flowers. Consider eco-friendly, organic, fair trade or VeriFlora-certified flowers. "Buying 'green' flowers is a great way to support better farming practices all over the world, and they're priced competitively," Stewart says. Find eco-friendly options at organicbouquet.com and www.flowerbud.com.

4. Compare prices. Find out how much will be added to the price for service charges, shipping or delivery and whether a vase is included in the price. "A good way to comparison shop is to find out how many stems you're getting, then calculate the price per stem," Stewart says. "Mixed bouquets and potted plants are good values, too."

5. Read the terms. Check the company's replacement or refund policy and freshness guarantee. Find out who will deliver the flowers -- a ground carrier such as FedEx or a floral shop employee. Provide the correct delivery address where the recipient can receive the flowers directly.

-- Janet Reese