



# Flower power

Organic Bouquet blooms before a chemical-intensive industry

BY APRIL STREETER

Five years ago Gerald Prolman couldn't convince U.S. flower producers to switch to organic production to support his nascent Web-based flower business. Now domestic growers line up at conferences for a chance to speak with him.

Back then, Prolman did what any eager entrepreneur might — he took his idea off-shore, to Colombia and Ecuador in particular. There he found a few producers open to organic production or already trying to grow roses with minimal chemical inputs.

"I spent a year talking to growers in California trying to get them to go organic," Prolman said. "Growing organic produce is very sophisticated. But when I did have a grower, I found it very difficult to find tools to give them. It was necessary to go to where the flowers grow."

By the end of 2003, Prolman's company, Organic Bouquet, had sold millions of stems for premium prices. The Organic Trade Association predicts this new organic floral segment will grow 13 percent annually through 2008.

The sweet smell of success is welcome to Prolman, who said he expected consumers to embrace organically grown blooms.

In addition to building the business, a big quest for Prolman in the last two years has been to bring to fruition an international standard for low-input and organic flower production. Called Veriflora and launched in June at the U.N.-sponsored World Environment Day in San Francisco, the standard is unique in the organic world. It includes a social responsibility principle calling for producers to meet international labor standards. It also allows growers to transition from an integrated pest management system to organic over a number of years to be specified by auditors.

Prolman's task of launching an "eco-label" for flowers was aided by earlier movements to correct some of the social and environmental ills European consumers learned about in flower-growing regions such as Colombia and Ecuador. One eco-label, Max Havelaar of Switzerland, captures about 25 percent of the domestic rose market. In Germany, the Flower Label Program has 60 farms participating in six countries.

While there's little doubt that labeling standards set up systems that can protect workers, reduce pesticide use and improve soil conditions, cut flowers — even if organic — are one consumer luxury that might be hard to label sustainable.

## Every rose has its thorn

Since the 1920s, when the Society of American Florists coined the tagline "Say it with flowers," consumers have consistently bought more bouquets for more occasions.

By the 1960s, a concerted effort in the region of Colombia near the capitol of Bogotá has made the country the largest exporter to the United States, next to the Netherlands. By 1994, Colombia sent a 35-ton cargo plane to Europe stuffed with cut flowers every three hours, according to a report by researcher Gwen Curtis.

Because flowers, especially popular long-stem roses and ubiquitous carnations, aren't usually eaten, they aren't checked by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for pesticide residues. However, incoming blooms are minutely inspected for any

aphids, worms or other live pests that might have hitched a ride, and infested blooms are destroyed. That gives flower producers incentive to use pesticides or the nematicides that kill pesky critters.

Pristine flower quality demanded by U.S. and European consumers is another motivator for producers to use chemical arsenals at every stage of flower growth. The floriculture industry, in fact, uses more pesticides per acre than any other agricultural commodity.

Margaret Reeve, a researcher at the Pesticide Action Network in San Francisco, estimated there are as many as 350 million pesticide poisonings each year among agricultural workers.

In addition to a storehouse of chemicals, gorgeous blooms generally rely on the sunshine and cheap labor found in Colombia, Ecuador and other countries in southern latitudes.

Troy Conner, general manager at Kendall Farms in Fallbrook, Calif., said his flower farm's pursuit of Veriflora certification was one way to differentiate itself. "We compete heavily with South America, and it's a very tough market because of labor costs," Conner said. "We'll always be competing against them."

The flower workers, mainly women who earn low wages and are exposed to dangerous pesticides, captured activists' attention in the late 1990s. The concern didn't spread to the United States, though, until Prolman, a veteran in the organic scene as founder of Made in Nature, launched Organic Bouquet in 2001.

## Chiriboga's challenge

Biogarden La Pampa, a rose farm in Riobamba, Ecuador, had already started implementing some non-chemical production practices by the time Prolman partnered with farm president Hernan Chiriboga.

Prolman said he wanted organic roses, and he was willing to buy three years' crop at guaranteed prices if Biogarden La Pampa could produce its long-stems organically.

Chiriboga told a crowd at the June 2005 World Environment Day conference that organic production is an unending technical challenge. The farm tries to stay one step ahead by constantly researching natural pesticides — herb oils from chilies, chamomile and mint, which bad bugs avoid — as well as beneficial bug and fungi habitats inside the greenhouses.

Roberto Nevado, another Ecuador-based Organic Bouquet rose grower that is not organic but has amassed nearly every other flower eco-label, said he's not convinced of the economic benefits of certified production. "If you ask me if it is profitable, I can not answer," Nevado said.

While improvements to workers' health might be undeniable, floriculture is a cutthroat industry,

organic or not. Producers tend to receive about one-tenth of what consumers pay.

Retailer mark-up takes another big slice. And a significant portion of the consumer cost is burned up in transportation, not just in getting flowers from point A to the display at Fred Meyer, but also for keeping them cool every step of the way to minimize floral jet-lag.

New flower production is also metastasizing further afield to places such as Kenya, Tanzania, and India. With all of the off-shore production, transport might be floriculture's Achilles heel in a time of rising oil prices.

But Prolman said the benefits still outweigh the drawback. "It does more good for Organic Bouquet to go to where the flowers grow than to get held up on the issue of transport," he said.



Gerald Prolman: Thinking locally and acting globally.

"For people who raise the issue, I ask if they really live that lifestyle. How, for example, did they get to their last vacation in Puerto Vallarta?"

A Kenyan rose farm owner, Dicky Evans, told the Guardian he thought transporting a rose to Europe used less energy and contributed less to global warming than growing the same stem in colder climes like the Netherlands.

Prolman insisted local flowers are his priority, and he wants to source "from the closest distance possible." Two of the first four farms that have received Veriflora certification are on the West Coast: Kendall Farms, which grows sunflowers and other tropical blooms, and Sun Valley Growers, a lily and tulip operation in Arcata, Calif.

Organic Bouquet's partnership with Sun Valley Growers, one of the largest cut-flower growers in the United States, is providential for a growth-

oriented company.

Citing competitive trade secrets, Sun Valley Growers stays mum on the steps it took to achieve Veriflora certification. The company previously attempted to move to organic production, according to a California Heartland article, and succeeded with an organic tulip after Prolman came calling. But how they might transition to organic in the vast lily greenhouses is a secret.

"It's not our mission to talk details," said head agronomist Tim Crockenburg.

Does Veriflora give Sun Valley Growers any advantages? Bruce McCall, the company's director of marketing, is also coy.

"If consumers want purple underwear or black hats, somebody will make those," McCall said. "It's the same in the floral industry. If consumers say organic tulips, we'll do it."

## 'Beating the drum'

Prolman conceived of Veriflora as a way to address social and environmental problems in floriculture, and to boost organic floral production. The carrot for growers is that they can still use chemical pesticides in an integrated pest management system for a length of time left to the discretion of auditors.

Robert Hrubes, vice president at Veriflora's auditing agency, Emeryville, Calif.-based Scientific Certification Systems (SCS), said the standard isn't foolproof, specifically in its social responsibility requirement for producers to adhere to labor standards "internationally, nationally or locally recognized."

"Almost every country has impressive standards on paper," Hrubes said. "The issue is whether or not anybody's following them."

Veriflora is still young, Hrubes said, and it will certainly evolve. He also said SCS is aware that for many of the eco-standards it oversees, implementing life-cycle analysis is the only way transportation and other hidden costs of production can be made transparent to consumers.

"A cradle-to-grave analysis from the point the seed is put in the ground to the point the flowers are sitting in a vase in somebody's dining room, that's the direction we are going."

At Kendall Farms in Fallbrook, Troy Conner said he hopes Veriflora's administrators don't forget to also educate and sell the new standard to U.S. consumers. Kendall's certification will open up markets such as Whole Foods for its sunflowers and exotics, Conner said.

But more will need to be done, he added.

"I hope they'll start beating the drum," he said. "As of now, I'm still in the red with the cost of certification and improvements. We're just a little voice, but Veriflora's pitch was advertising and promotion ... We haven't seen that yet." ●