

St Valentine's roses: The hidden costs of love

In the lead up to Valentine's Day, the huge demand in the northern hemisphere for out-of-season roses puts a time-sensitive global supply chain under pressure – and it's the climate and industry workers that feel the greatest impacts.

Red roses and global trade

In the weeks preceding the 14th February, some 250 million stems of roses will have made the journey from sunny flower growing hubs in countries like Kenya, Colombia and Ecuador to retailers in the wintry Northern Hemisphere – and some in the south too.

While the peak in demand promises profits, the strain placed on this supply chain is considerable.

SFN expert advisor Dr Jill Timms, a sociologist at the University of Surrey, has spent the past 20 years researching the impacts of the floriculture supply chain on people working in the industry.

“Buying roses on St Valentine's Day can be problematic,” says Dr Timms, “because millions of people around the world want to buy them then as well! This can contribute to intense growing periods, precarious work patterns on flower farms and heavy logistical burdens to get the roses to the consumer. Unfortunately, due to the distances the flowers travel, a high carbon footprint can also become part of the gift.”

That carbon footprint comes courtesy of fast, temperature-controlled freight systems with high energy requirements. Flowers are perishable and need to move quickly.

Dr Timms is co-lead of the Sustainable Cut Flowers Project in the UK, along with Professor David Bek, also an expert in horticultural supply chains and a Professor of Sustainability and Economic Development at Coventry University.

Professor Bek points out that countries in the Global South earn foreign exchange by exporting to markets like the USA and Europe.

“Trading flowers is very important for these countries' economies and provides a great deal of employment for many thousands of workers, especially women,” he says.

But both experts agree that the benefits of the trade are dependent on the quality of employment and the impacts on community and planetary resources.

Certifications and asking questions

“If consumers are going to buy imported flowers, they can try to support farms committed to worker and environmental welfare,” says Dr Timms. “Transparency is a big challenge to this, and something we are working to improve, but asking questions about provenance and any

certifications can help get the message through that consumers do care about these issues in relation to their flowers, just as many do about their food or clothes.”

Cut flower certification schemes such as Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, Veriflora, Florverde and MPS can help raise production standards, which can benefit both workers and the environment.

However, not all flowers are grown under these schemes. And certifications cannot discount the emissions produced by long-distance airfreight.

Advice for consumers

The SFN encourages consumers to consider the carbon footprint of their cut flowers not only on Valentine’s Day, but throughout the year. To make a more sustainable purchase, ask questions and:

- opt for locally-grown, seasonal flowers wherever possible – making sure fossil fuel heating has not been part of the growing process
- for imported flowers, look for certifications that support sustainable and fair work practices throughout supply chains
- consider a gift voucher from a florist that can be used when local flowers are in season
- select a design with minimal packaging and no floral foam, such as a hand-tied bouquet to be placed in a vase at home
- explore interesting fresh foliage as an alternative to cut flowers and enjoy the ‘houseplant effect’ – the buzz we experience from having fresh greenery in our home
- gift a plant in place of cut flowers.

About the Sustainable Floristry Network

The SFN is a new, independent global education organisation for florists committed to creating a more sustainable industry. The SFN’s Flowers 2030 education program offers certified continuing professional development training in sustainable floristry.

The first course, Foundation in Sustainable Floristry, teaches florists how to integrate sustainability principles into their practice.

The SFN Member Florist program supports consumers looking for a florist genuinely committed to transforming their business practice through education and workplace behaviors.

“Floristry is an unregulated industry, and anyone can call themselves a florist, or a sustainable florist,” says SFN Founder Rita Feldmann. “But what does that mean?”

“Our program creates a new standard for floristry and floral design by teaching florists, among many things, how to choose better flowers for their business and customers.”

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TO REQUEST AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR DAVID BEK, DR JILL TIMMS OR SFN’S RITA FELDMANN, PLEASE CONTACT [THE SFN](#)