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Flower business no bed of roses, author finds

By Georgia Tasker

A few years ago, Amy Stewart saw a flier for an open house at a flower farm in Eureka, Calif. A gardener and garden writer, she figured she'd enjoy a romantic show.

"It was Sun Valley, the largest flower grower in the country," she said. 'Here was this very industrial, high-tech company and I went `Wow! These flowers are being grown in a factory.' "

She wanted to know more. The flowers from her garden looked nothing like these flowers. How did flowers get to the point where they were factory products instead of romantic and fragrant works of nature?

Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers is her new book, which follows her inquisitive nose around the world. What she found is a growing concern for environmental practices and labor standards in this country's \$19-billion-a-year flower business. And she peeks into many of the world's greenhouses and flower markets with a contagious enthusiasm for discovery.

Stewart will talk at Books & Books in Coral Gables Saturday, just four days before the biggest flower day on the North American calendar, Valentine's Day.

(Just so you know: Stewart found that 70 percent of the cut flowers sold in the United States are imported and 12 million to 15 million flowers arrive in Miami International Airport every day for two weeks prior to Valentine's Day. Whew! More than 175 million roses are sold on Valentine's Day, she writes, with the average dozen roses costing just over \$70.)

What came from Stewart's global flower trek is an understanding of the way flowers of commerce have developed from mom and pop enterprises to industrial crops grown in one country, shipped to a second for auction, flown to a third for distribution.

She tells you about the breeding that goes into flowers to make them stand up to all that travel. They've lost their scent, for one thing, but have been given the ability to withstand ethylene gas. When fruit ripens, it gives off ethylene gas, a substance that hastens the wilting and dying of flowers. Since many flowers are sold in the produce sections of grocery stores, it's an important characteristic to have.

She traveled from the Sun Valley Floral Farms in California, the largest flower farm in the country with four million square feet of flowers in production, to the highlands of Ecuador, where ``roses are known for their gigantic heads, long stems and brilliant colors."

In Ecuador, Stewart says, "I found myself turning into a rose snob. This was haute couture for flowers and I got completely sucked into it. . . . These weren't just roses. . . . They were something else entirely -- the floral equivalent of a Tiffany diamond, all polished and carved and styled to perfection."

But the cost to Ecuadoreans and other Latin Americans producing perfect Tiffany roses can be high: low wages, no benefits, child labor, health problems from the chemicals and harm to natural resources.

Yet, change is coming, she reports.

This year, what already is in place in Europe and many other countries will debut in North America: a certification program for cut flowers that tells consumers that the flowers have been sustainably grown, handled properly to meet quality guidelines and produced with fair labor standards.

Created by Scientific Certification Systems, an independent certification company that develops environmental standards, the program is called VeriFlora.

While the need for certification is the message of the book, there are myriad other details wonderfully abundant for anyone who has ever sniffed a rose or wired a flower.

Stewart tracks a single rose grown in Ecuador to Miami, where its box is trucked off to a florist. She gets the insider's tour of Aalsmeer, the Dutch town that is the heart of the world's flower trade, "handling most of the flowers sold on the European markets and some of the goods going to Russia, China, Japan and even the United States." Some 19 million flowers a day are sold at Aalsmeer.

She visits Multi Color Flowers, also in Aalsmeer, where 50 million flowers a year are dyed before heading to market. And she spends Valentine's Day in a flower shop in Eureka, Calif., where Aus Heuer and two floral designers filled orders all day long, making bouquets in fewer than five minutes from the flowers lining pails on the counters and down the halls.

Stewart even deals with funeral flowers, noting that "in lieu of flowers" are the four most dreaded words to a florist.

As a result of all this travel and writing, Stewart says, "I am a pickier consumer of flowers now. And I buy more now than before. I got a better handle on what a good value flowers are. I can't just walk past flowers, ever."

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