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In flowers, too, green is the new red For Valentine's Day, choose flowers raised organically and sustainably -- or nearly so

Amy Stewart, Special to The Chronicle



Walk into any supermarket and you'll find products that satisfy not only your taste buds but your values, too. Fair Trade coffee and chocolate, organic apples and free-range eggs are becoming mainstream thanks to the demands of socially and environmentally responsible shoppers. But what about those flowers in buckets near the cash register? Where did those come from? Under what conditions were they grown?

Until recently, there was no easy answer to that question. A mixed bouquet at the supermarket could contain roses from Ecuador, carnations from Colombia and California greens, each grown under different conditions. Organic flowers have been almost impossible to find at a florist. Although they're available at farmers' markets during the growing season, that might not help if you want to send a bouquet to your sweetheart in Minneapolis this Feb. 14.

But that's about to change. The \$6 billion American cut-flower industry has been slow to embrace the idea of an eco-label for cut flowers, although such programs have been popular in Europe for years. Now a group of Bay Area innovators has taken the lead, and if they get their way, 2007 will be the year that "green" flowers finally catch on. Their influence may well be felt not just here at home, but across the country and in Latin America as well.

Northern California roots

Like any good grassroots revolution, this story begins with small farms that are accountable to their neighbors. According to Marin Organic's executive director, Helge Hellberg, organic farmers in the Bay Area are expanding their cut flower selection, to the delight of their customers. "It's a good crop for our farmers," Hellberg said. "It creates biodiversity, it's a good rotating crop, and it's lucrative." The flowers themselves just get better and better, he said, and locally grown organic flowers can meet the exacting standards of the global cut flower industry. "Our farmers can produce those perfect flowers people expect," he said, "but they also have variety and amazing scents. That's the juice of life."

Patricia Damery of Harms Vineyard and Lavender Fields in Napa Valley began growing lavender when she and her husband, Donald Harms, switched to biodynamic methods in their vineyard. "We had a grape crop that wasn't ripening," Damery said. "We called in a biodynamic consultant who helped to save a portion of our crop. We were amazed. We realized that biodynamic lavender made sense for our farm, too." Biodynamic methods, which are certified through Demeter USA in Oregon, encompass not just organic farming techniques but a wider range of strategies to support insect and animal populations, native plants and the health of the land.

"We think about our land in a different way now," Damery said. "When you buy cut flowers, you are subscribing to a whole process. This is not just about the fact that the flowers you bring home haven't been sprayed with pesticides. You also know that when bees visited that flower, they weren't poisoned. You know that the workers who harvested those flowers were safe."

Damery credits the Bay Area for her success. "I grew up on a farm in the Midwest," she said. "Some of the farmers back there told me that I would be laughed at if I tried biodynamic farming there. But we don't have that problem here. People here celebrate what we're doing."

In addition to selling her lavender bouquets locally, she supplies Marin's OrganicBouquet.com, which ships organic and sustainably grown flowers nationwide. Gerald Prolman, founder and CEO, began looking for organic suppliers of cut flowers five years ago.

"Initially, I hoped to find all the supply I needed here in California," Prolman said. "I tried to persuade growers to start new greenhouses with organic production, but this was during our energy crisis, and there wasn't much information out there for growers about organic techniques. The risk for them was too great. I went to Ecuador and Colombia next because there were growers who were already using more advanced practices and selling those flowers to the European market." Now the company purchases about a third of its flowers from farms in California - with plans to expand, thanks to a partnership with Marin Organic -- but it's also supporting innovative farmers in Latin America.

One such farm is Nevado Ecuador, a rose farm south of Quito that has received environmental certifications from nearly a dozen agencies around the world, including the European Fair Flowers Fair Plants label and a new United States label called VeriFlora. The farm uses organic practices exclusively in some greenhouses, and the rest are managed with sustainable techniques that permit the use of certain less toxic chemicals under limited conditions.

The certification programs that Nevado participates in govern more than the farm's use of pesticides and fertilizers; they also ensure that it conserves water and other natural resources, recycles waste, builds soil health, and provides additional benefits and protections for workers. All Nevado roses sold through the international Fair Trade program earn the workers an additional 12 percent premium, which they have used to start an Internet cafe, a day care center and a microfinance loan program.

The farm's president, John Nevado, is aware that U.S. consumers may be skeptical of the benefits of buying Latin American roses, especially given the environmental impact of transporting the flowers. "I would say the jury is out on this question," he said. "Europeans have come to realize that a Kenyan rose, even transported by air, generates less pollution than a European rose that must still be transported to market and would have required an artificially heated and lighted greenhouse."

OrganicBouquet's Prolman points out that Latin American flowers are typically transported in the cargo holds of passenger jets that would be making the trip anyway. "But it's important that progressive companies do what they can to offset the carbon emissions from fuel use," he said. His company purchases carbon credits that are used to support a truck stop electrification program, eliminating the need for trucks to idle at truck stops.

The nation's demand for organic flowers is on the rise. According to the Organic Trade Association, sales of organic flowers topped \$16 million in 2005, which represents about 2.5 percent of U.S. cut flower sales. Still, the category grew by 50 percent over the previous year, and Emeryville's Scientific Certification Systems is betting that the strong growth will continue.

SCS, a certifying agency for the USDA's National Organic Program, the Forest Stewardship Council and the Marine Stewardship Council, was approached in 2003 by a group of U.S. floral retailers and distributors about developing an eco-label for flowers sold in the United States, regardless of where those flowers were grown.

The standard it developed, called VeriFlora, requires growers to use organic methods or to develop plans to transfer each crop to organic. The most hazardous chemicals are banned, and others can be used only under limited circumstances with strict monitoring. Growers are required to conserve water, establish buffer zones to protect native habitats and comply with a set of labor standards. The standard also requires growers, shippers and retailers to follow "cold chain management" practices that keep the flowers cool, ensuring that they will last longer in the vase.

VeriFlora has now certified 11 growers in the United States and Latin America, representing more than 500 million stems. But where are those flowers? "This year for the first time we're turning our attention to retailers," said Alexander Winslow, SCS's director of communications. A few markets, including Trader Joe's and Safeway, already carry flowers from VeriFlora-certified farms. This year, new labels on VeriFlora bouquets will allow customers to know what they're buying and vote with their dollars. "Tell your florist to call us," Winslow said. "We'll get them involved."

Oakland's TransFair USA is also looking forward to introducing Fair Trade flowers later this year. "People are already familiar with Fair Trade," produce accounts manager Hannah Freeman said. "We think the conceptual jump to flowers from coffee or bananas should not be too much of a challenge for consumers."

Fair Trade-certified farms receive a premium for the workers that is built into the price of every stem. "Fair Trade workers are empowered to assess their own community development needs," Freeman said. "I know workers who own their own homes, thanks to the housing fund that the workers' organization created."

A certification program only works with proper accountability, according to Nora Ferm, who works in Ecuador as program director for the International Labor Rights Fund's "Fairness in Flowers" campaign.

"When there is a certification program in place, workers are not always aware of it," she said. She regularly reviews the standards and provides suggestions for strengthening worker protection and making the process more transparent, and she has accompanied auditors when they monitor the farms.

Although she'd like to see some of the standards improved, particularly when it comes to union organizing, she emphasizes the need for consumers to buy certified flowers.

"Don't boycott Latin American flowers," she said. "These workers are in rural areas with few employment alternatives, especially for women. There have been tangible results with fair trade in other sectors, like coffee and chocolate. We can hope for similar positive impacts for flowers through these programs."

Some retailers aren't waiting for **VeriFlora** and Fair Trade labels. Florist Teresa Sabankaya already offers organic and locally grown flowers at her shop, Bonny Doon Garden Co., on Pacific Avenue in Santa Cruz. "I love offering organic flowers," she said. "Those bouquets sell better than anything else." She's had to work hard to find organic growers locally, but her efforts have been rewarded: One nearby farmer is adding another 10 acres of organic production. "The florist has a huge part in creating the demand," she said. "If I buy it, they'll keep growing it."

This year, for Valentine's Day, she'll be selling local Watsonville roses and **VeriFlora**-certified Ecuadoran roses side-by-side. "My pitch to my customers is that we can buy local, and we can also help support these farms in Ecuador that are changing the way roses are grown there," she said. "We need to honor these people who have recognized the need to change the way we treat the Earth. That's our Valentine's Day gift to the planet."

A Guide to U.S. Eco-Labels for Flowers

Look for flowers with these labels, or ask your florist to carry them. A bouquet could have more than one type of certification and the flowers may receive these certifications whether they are grown in the United States or elsewhere. Because growers must pay to participate in these certification programs, some small farmers prefer to use eco-friendly practices without going through a formal certification process.

-- Demeter Biodynamic certifies that flowers are grown according to biodynamic principles, which include organic growing techniques, wildlife diversity, crop rotation, treating the farm as a complete ecosystem and finding farm-based solutions to pest, disease and fertility problems. www.demeter-usa.org.

-- Fair Trade flowers are certified through the nonprofit TransFair USA, part of a global network of Fair Trade certifiers. The emphasis is on labor protections and economic development programs directly controlled by and benefiting workers. The standard also requires more environmentally sensitive, but not necessarily organic, farming practices. www.transfairusa.org.

-- USDA National Organic Program ensures that flowers are grown according to a set of organic farming standards developed by the USDA. A USDA-approved certifier must visit the farm. www.ams.usda.gov/NOP

-- **VeriFlora certified flowers must be grown in accordance with a set of sustainable agricultural, environmental and labor standards, as verified by independent auditors. If a farm is not organic, it must develop plans to transfer to organic over time. Quality is also a key component: Flowers must be kept cool from the farm to the shop so they remain fresh and last longer in the vase. www.veriflora.com**

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