

Pushing The Sustainability Wave

Suppliers recognize the value of offering retailers eco-friendly bouquets and other certified floral products.

BY AMY SHANNON

While all corners of the produce industry work to incorporate socially responsible or environmentally friendly products into their list of offerings, the floral world is not far behind, offering an array of certified bouquets and other floral items.

"With environmental concerns an emerging societal issue, it is important that flower growers and marketers communicate not only the beauty of our product, but also that it is being grown in an eco-friendly, responsible way," explains Bruce Brady, director of marketing and business development for Farmers' West Flowers & Bouquets Inc., based in Carpinteria, CA.

María Brous, director of media and community relations for Publix Super Markets Inc., a Lakeland, FL-based chain, agrees, adding, "It is the right thing to do for the environment. Consumers are demanding certified floral products because of the sustainability factor and they are interested in saving our planet's natural resources." The chain only conducts business with floral companies that support certification programs at the farm level. "Our Smart bouquets offer a card with green tips. Also, some of the bouquets have a seal indicating the alliance they belong to along with a [corresponding] Web site."

Many suppliers and retailers are quick to adopt certified products as a matter of social responsibility, but others are holding back, unsure of the potential impact of certification programs, and perhaps still unaware of exactly what sets certified and non-certified products apart. Standardizing organizations are working to educate both retailers and suppliers to "validate their claims and keep producers from making idle assertions [or

green-washing]," says Brady.

Fair Trade, granted in the United States by Oakland, CA-based TransFair USA, is one of the most recognizable certification programs. World Flowers LLC, an Englewood, NJ-based supplier and subsidiary branch of Oserian Flowers, a Naivasha, Kenya-based farm that works with buyers in Europe and the United States, offers all Fair Trade-certified floral products. "Fair Trade has a very strict set of rules and a rigorous series of audits," states Joseph Farrell, president of World Flowers.

Organic Bouquet Inc., located in San Francisco, CA, supports many sustainability programs, including Fair Trade, New York, NY-based Rainforest Alliance (RA), Oakland, CA-based VeriFlora, Bogotá, Columbia-based Florverde, as well as several other certification groups. "Some of these we do not support as stand-alone certifications, but offer them as part of multi-certified choices," emphasizes Robert McLaughlin, president of Organic Bouquet. "They all have their strong points, and all of them beat the alternatives of no social or environmental responsibility."

Educating retailers, as well as consumers, about various certification programs is an important aspect to marketing certification programs. "We give them responsible choices at a competitive price," explains McLaughlin. "Our stance on certifications and eco-friendly products is that we support all the major certifications after careful internal review."

The Elite Flower, based in Doral, FL, specializes in roses, spray roses, alstroemeria, gerbera and farm-made bouquets. Elite is currently certified by Florverde, VeriFlora and Rainforest Alliance, according to Alan Parkhurst, AIFD, PFCI, a floral designer.



Photo courtesy of B and H Flowers

Publix offers EarthSmart flowers, which are packaged in biodegradable sleeves.

"We've been a member of VeriFlora for at least four years," Parkhurst notes. "The industry leaders are all going in the direction of being green. There's a strong demand for certified products, but unfortunately not too many people want to pay for it, retailers or consumers."

Farmers' West became VeriFlora-certified in 2008 and subsequently began including the VeriFlora label as part of its flower bunches and bouquets. The certified products include lilies, gerberas and germinis, snapdragons, dahlias, matsumoto asters, lisianthus, liatris and sunflowers. "VeriFlora has been called the gold standard of the sustainability movement," claims Brady. "Since becoming VeriFlora-certified, the big increase in requests has been for sustainably grown flowers."

This is due in part to the abundance of marketing information developed by certified growers — the VeriFlora Sustainability Council and Scientific Certification Systems (SCS), the Emeryville, CA-based creator of the VeriFlora standard — Brady adds, suggesting retailers contact their suppliers to find out which standards they use. “Then, request materials from the certifying organization to use as additional incentives to drive floral sales.”

Several flowers and greens supplied by Vista, CA-based fresh-cut flower supplier Dos Gringos — A California Flower Company are VeriFlora-certified. “VeriFlora inspects our farms to ensure that certified crops are being grown in accordance with sustainable agricultural practices,” explains Joan Saunders, manager of executive services. “We’ve been certified for over a year. We initially looked into the certification program because we felt it was a good fit for our clients, such as Whole Foods Market.”

All floral products supplied by Homestead, FL-based Kerry’s Nursery Inc. are VeriFlora-certified, says Alex Sevilla, vice president of sales and marketing. Kerry’s became certified in early 2009. “It gives us a way to communicate to the world that we are environmentally conscious.”

B and H Flowers Inc., located in Carpinteria, CA, is the first flower grower in Santa Barbara County to be VeriFlora-certified as a sustainably grown greenhouse operation, according to Scott Fulton, vice president of sales and marketing. The fifth-generation family operation has been VeriFlora-certified for three years, and it has worked with some floral products certified as USDA-organic for a little more than a year. “For us, receiving the certification was more a validation [of our practices],” Fulton explains. “The fact is, we’ve been growing sustainably for a long time. Still, it has helped us become better suppliers.”

EDUCATE CONSUMERS

Knowledge about each of the major certification programs and what they mean is growing, experts say. Still, many retailers are in the dark. “We talk to a lot of people who only have a real basic understanding,” notes World Flowers’ Farrell. “Some supermarkets aren’t ready just yet. It takes time to get a program going, but once it does, it takes off like wildfire.”

McLaughlin of Organic Bouquet suggests retailers spend time learning about each certification directly from the certifying agency. “But they also must trust their supplier for up-to-date information,” he adds.

Publix’s floral products include certification labels. For instance, its alstros and lilies

Go The Distance

Some suppliers have recognized the benefits of certification programs and are taking their sustainability efforts one step further. For instance, Dos Gringos built its facility with a unique waste system that sweeps green waste into grates, propels them down a conveyor belt and into a compost bin. The compost material is later picked up by the City of Vista, allowing the contract flower grower to turn a week’s worth of discarded stems, leaves and errant petals into mulch that fertilizes parks, hiking trails and roadside foliage throughout the community. “It’s a win-win for our facilities and the city,” explains Joan Saunders, manager of executive services.

Created by Jason Levin, Dos Gringos’ president, the system serves as an environmentally friendly alternative to the

time-consuming, labor-intensive practice of sweeping each production station individually to combine all waste in several garbage bins destined for area landfills.

B and H collects all of its rainwater and irrigation water in a percolating pond and holding tank and then recycles the water through a completely self-contained system, completely eliminating any runoff. The company also inspects plants and water valves daily to minimize wasted water, and has installed high-efficiency water pumps. Additionally, the business makes extensive use of beneficial insects, uses soft or organic products in the rare instance treatment is needed and is increasing the use of certified organic fertilizers. The company’s extensive recycling program works to conserve resources and minimize waste. **pb**

are labeled as Rainforest alliance-certified, and its Earth Smart bouquets include certification labeling, notes Brous. Packaged in biodegradable sleeves, Earth Smart flowers are grown and distributed by Gems, a Miami, FL-based marketer of fresh-cut flowers. The flowers are grown and packaged using certified social and environmental standards, including integrated pest management practices, optimal irrigation techniques, sound disposal alternatives and control of air emissions.

Later this year, Organic Bouquet plans to launch its new business-to-business platform, which will allow the company to become a trading and educational content site for the floral industry. “We have several POP materials to assist retailers at the consumer level,” reports McLaughlin. The company also is in the process of initiating the first and largest certification of retailers through a 50-store pilot program.

The marketing department at Farmers’ West works with its retail customers to develop custom marketing programs to suit their promotional needs. “We believe in growing great flowers and providing marketing materials that help to sell our flowers,” notes Brady.

Likewise, Dos Gringos creates special labels for its certified bouquets. “We’ll customize whatever we need, whether it’s information on the product or a label of some kind, based on our customers’ needs,” reports Saunders.

“We are willing to help retailers with marketing materials,” adds Elite’s Parkhurst.

“We’ll customize just about anything, including counter signs for coolers.”

EXPLORE ORGANIC

Organic Bouquet and Organic Style, the online provider of eco-friendly and organic gifts, will more than double its revenue in 2009-10 as the rest of the industry is seeing decline, according to McLaughlin. “We’re working hard in new ventures and initiatives that allow us to build the foundation needed to lead the organic and sustainable floral industry.”

Organic Bouquet’s current organic projects include three hectares of organic roses in Ecuador, as well as several projects dealing with premium, heirloom and organic produce. “We’ve been investing millions in organic projects in both North and South America,” McLaughlin remarks. USDA-certified organic floral products are in great demand. “Growing the supply continues to be the problem of this industry. But we have plans to double the world’s certified organic flowers in the next few years. All of our organic floral products will be dually certified as organic and sustainable.”

While some suppliers are more hesitant than Organic Bouquet to delve into the organic floral sector, many are considering it in the near future. “A small portion of the products we work with are already organic-certified, even though we do not ship and label them as such,” states Saunders of Dos Gringos. “We are, however, in the process of receiving our Organic Handler Certification. It’s the wave of the future.” **pb**