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feature story



More consumers are demanding environmentally friendly products, and the floral industry is responding.

by Amy Bauer

From Fair Trade coffee to organic breakfast cereals and locally, sustainably grown produce, products with a conscience are popping up all over today, and that movement is making its way into flower shops and the floriculture industry as a whole.

growing green

You'll hear different terms regarding a flower's environmental and social impact. "Organic," "sustainably grown," "environmentally friendly," "worker-friendly," "socially responsible," "green." Each flower certification program has its own standards—some addressing the environmental impact of the production (such as pesticide use and water conservation), some addressing the social impact of the production (such as working conditions and wages), some addressing flower quality standards (such as cold-chain management), and others addressing all of these aspects. There are fees that companies must pay for most certification processes, in addition to any corrective measures to meet the particular standards.



Esmeralda Farms Chairman Peter Ullrich says there is a marked difference between awareness of eco-labels in the U.S. versus Europe.

Lane DeVries, president and CEO of **The Sun Valley Group**, Arcata, Calif., says it's just in the past seven to nine months that the company has started promoting its Veriflora certification (see "Green Labels for Flowers," Page 52) with the seal on its products. Sun Valley was among companies that joined in developing the Veriflora standards, which certify flowers and plants grown anywhere in the world and for sale in North America for their environmental, social, sustainability and quality practices. Sun Valley's first products were certified in 2005, with certification for all of its farms being achieved within the past year.

"From a pure dollars-and-cents perspective, we have not seen any benefit from this program, as of yet anyway, and I'm not sure that we will, at least in the foreseeable future," Mr. DeVries describes, noting that there's no difference in the price buyers pay for a certified stem versus a noncertified stem. "The real goal in this is not necessarily to do this for a profit motive."

Producers say organic products, however, do come with higher price tags. The **U.S. Department of Agriculture** certifies that a product meets the criteria to be labeled "organic," and its USDA Organic seal can be applied to such products. The seal also can be found on

some imported products, including flowers; the USDA has certifiers in other countries.

In Sun Valley's case, it has been producing some of its tulips organically for the past six years. Mr. DeVries says his company pays double what it pays for a conventional bulb. For buyers, he says, this results in a 30 percent higher price for Sun Valley's organic tulips versus its conventionally grown tulips. "In that case, we can only do a program like that if we're able to get compensated for that extra cost," he explains.

Another hurdle to organic production for Sun Valley is a limited supply of organic bulbs. Part of the Veriflora label is a requirement that companies either be producing organic product or have a plan to transition to organic production, though no timeline is attached to this requirement, says **Alexander Winslow**, director of communications for **Scientific Certification Systems (SCS)**, which owns the Veriflora standard and manages the certification program.

Miami, Fla.-based **Esmeralda Farms** has growing operations in Colombia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Mexico and Peru, and it carries a number of eco-labels, including FLP (Flower Label Program), MPS (Milieu Programma Sierteelt), Florverde and Veriflora. Chairman **Peter Ullrich** says there is a marked difference between awareness of eco-labels in the United States versus Europe. "In Europe, the Flower Label Program and MPS have value," he describes. "People are more trained to recognize those labels and to support companies that comply."

green labels for flowers

Organic: According to the **Organic Trade Association (OTA)**, "organic" refers to agricultural practices that "maintain and replenish soil fertility without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers." Flowers and plants may carry the **USDA Organic** seal. To do so, they must meet the guidelines of the **National Organic Program (NOP)** of the **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)**. A USDA-accredited certifying agency ensures that guidelines are met, and there are international certifiers to gauge products that will be exported to the United States. Growers and handlers with less than \$5,000 in sales of organic products are exempt from certification and may label their products as organic if they adhere to the same standards, but they can't use the USDA Organic seal.



www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexNet.htm

Florverde: This label developed in 1996 by **Asocolflores**, the **Colombian Association of Flower Exporters**, applies to flowers grown in Colombia that have met standards of sustainable farming practices such as reducing pesticide use, including banning any pesticides not registered for use in the United States and European Union, and conserving water; and standards for working conditions such as not hiring employees younger than 18 and paying above-market wages. **Augusto Solano**, president of Asocolflores, says as of April, 137 companies representing 167 farms were participating in Florverde. Of those, 109 had been certified by independent auditor **SGS Group**, of Switzerland. SGS has certified such farms since 2003 and this year began annually inspecting all certified farms.



www.florverde.org

FlorEcuador: A program of **Expoflores**, the **Ecuadorian Association of Flower Growers and Exporters**, FlorEcuador began in June 2005 to hold its members to standards regarding environmental practices, social practices and quality. There are two stages to FlorEcuador: Chapter 1, mandatory for all 180 Expoflores members, requires that companies meet basic standards and is certified by Expoflores; Chapter 2, which five farms have achieved, is certified by **SGS Group**, an independent auditor based in Switzerland, and requires that companies meet higher standards, including Good Agriculture Practices (GAP). **Wendy Obando Sevilla**, program manager for FlorEcuador, says 35 farms have Chapter 1 certification, with the rest working toward certification, and she says Expoflores has conducted 92 inspections.



www.expoflores.com/index1.php

Fair Trade: This label has been in existence in Europe since the early 1990s and in the United States since 1999. In May, the label was to begin applying to cut flowers grown in developing countries for sale in the United States. **TransFair USA** is the certifying agency that oversees the label for U.S.-sold flowers, and **Hannah Freeman**, produce and floral account manager, said as of mid-April that 32 growers around the world were to be Fair Trade certified in cut flowers. The label guarantees livable wages and has standards for working conditions and the environment. Buyers/importers pay a social premium that goes to a fund at the farms for worker development programs. Buyers/importers also pay a volume fee to cover audits and consumer awareness campaigns.



www.transfairusa.org

Veriflora: This label applies to flowers and potted plants grown anywhere in the world that are being sold in North America and certifies that those products were produced in ways that preserve the environment, ensure good working conditions and provide optimal flower quality such as cold-chain management. The Veriflora certification can apply either to specific cultivars or to entire farms or companies. Created in 2003, Veriflora's first certifications were granted in 2005. As of mid-April, 13 growers representing 32 farms in South America and six growers representing 18 farms in the United States were either certified or about to achieve certification, according to **Alexander Winslow**, director of communications for **Scientific Certification Systems (SCS)**, which owns the rights to the Veriflora label and manages the certification program. Three North American floral distributors also have Veriflora certification.



www.scs-certified.com/csrpurchasing/veriflora

Sierra Eco: This brand was created by Montreal-based **Sierra Flower Trading, Ltd.**, in 1999. In addition to applying this label to products that carry certain environmental certifications, the company developed a video and marketing materials to promote the brand and its meaning as well as allowing wholesale and retail florists who commit to the same values to carry the label as well, says **Tom Leckman**, president and CEO. Sierra Flower Trading is a certified Veriflora handler and was among companies that helped develop that standard.



www.sierraeco.com

European labels: A number of green labels are present in the European and international flower marketplace. Among them are **EurepGAP**, www.eurepgap.org; **FFP (Fair Flowers Fair Plants)**, www.fairflowersfairplants.com; **Max Havelaar**, Switzerland, www.maxhavelaar.ch/en/; **Flower Label Program (FLP)**, Germany, www.fairflowers.de; **MPS (Milieu Programma Sierteelt)**, the Netherlands; **LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming)**, the United Kingdom, www.leafuk.org; and **KENYAGAP**, Kenya, www.fpeak.org.

Another hurdle in the traditional retail florist channel is maintaining certification labels with their related flowers to inform consumers. When florists take bunches apart and use just a few stems for an arrangement, "the information is lost right then and there," Mr. Ullrich says.

Such labels haven't translated into a premium price for growers' responsibly produced products in the United States, Mr. Ullrich reports. But he, too, says Esmeralda has continued with such certification programs because of their larger benefits. "If we don't get more for our flowers, we will continue in the same program because it's a good program for our workers and it's a good program for the environment," he explains.



"To the extent the market demands sustainable practices, growers will respond. Consumers will demand eco-flowers if they know they are available."

--- Gerald Prolman, founder and CEO of Organic Bouquet, Inc.

customer demand

As one indicator of the growth of this category in the flower industry, the **Organic Trade Association's** 2006 Manufacturer Survey gives a clue. Sales of organic flowers were \$16 million in 2005, a 50 percent increase over 2004. **Organic Bouquet, Inc.**, a company that since 2001 has been selling organic flowers and other certified sustainable flowers direct to consumers at www.organicbouquet.com, predicted earlier this year that consumer demand will exceed \$100 million in such flower purchases by 2012. **Gerald Prolman**, founder and CEO of Organic Bouquet, says his company's sales have nearly doubled each of the past few years. And last year, the company added a wholesale division, www.organicbouquetwholesale.com to supply florists and retailers with organic and Veriflora-certified flowers.

"To the extent the market demands sustainable practices, growers will respond. Consumers will demand eco-flowers if they know they are available. It's the classic chicken-and-the-egg story," he describes. Mr. Prolman has been among those helping to increase the demand. He led the effort to create the Veriflora standard by bringing the idea and key grower and distributor players together, Mr. Winslow says.

Amy Stewart, author of *Flower Confidential*, a book released in February that delves behind the scenes of the industry, says retailer interest in organic and sustainable flowers seems to have been growing recently. She's increasingly hearing from retailers looking to source such products.

She's asked each audience in her promotional tour of more than two dozen cities how many would buy a product because it's organic, sustainable or socially responsible. "On average, two-thirds of the audience raised their hands," she describes, though noting this is a self-selected group with an interest in the topic. "The lowest I ever saw was about half, but there were many times when it was 100 percent."

business evolution

Teresa Sabankaya, owner of **The Bonny Doon Garden Co.**, in Santa Cruz, Calif., was featured in *Flower Confidential* and has made organic flowers a priority for her business, which she purchased in 2003 after designing out of her home. She offers organic and Veriflora-certified flowers as well as conventionally grown flowers, and she says she sees such demand rising. She grows many of her flowers organically on her own plot of land in Bonny Doon, Calif. Other organic flowers she sources primarily from small growers and at farmers' markets.

In August 2006, she was approached by local natural foods grocer **New Leaf Markets** to provide bouquets. The market didn't specifically require organic flowers though Ms. Sabankaya says that was her goal. She has worked with one of her local growing partners who agreed to plant for her 10 acres of organic flowers, including stocks, bells-of-Ireland, Queen Anne's lace and Asiatic lilies. "The only stumbling block that I've ever had, besides the challenge of growing organically itself," Ms. Sabankaya says, "was variety."

While some customers seek out organic flowers, she says for others it's simply an added benefit. And some may not see the value. "I still get the customer every now and then who will be looking through a bucket of flowers, and I'll have my organic sign on it, and they'll say, 'What does it really matter? You're not eating them,'" she describes. "So we still have a few people who are not looking at it in a global way.

"What we're trying to do is, one by one, explain to people it's good for the environment to grow them in this way. It's good for the people who are handling them. It's good for you," she says. "And it can be done."

Wedding flowers are an area that perhaps is seeing this "greening" increase more rapidly than other segments of the floral industry. A Feb. 11, 2007, New York Times story, "How Green Was My Wedding," described the trend toward environmentally conscious weddings and events. And a consumer-oriented monthly online magazine, *Portovert* (www.portovert.com), was unveiled this spring catering to "eco-savvy brides and grooms."

Danielle Venokur, who previously had worked as event director and later general manager for high-end New York floral design house **L'Olivier**, took this knowledge and her own commitment to Earth-friendly living to create New York sustainable event design and production company **dvGreen**, www.dvgreen.com, which she began operating full time in February. Ms. Venokur

hires freelancers or partners with a shop like L'Olivier for the floral design, but she manages where the flowers are sourced. She says the company also eschews floral foam in favor of hand-tied designs or will use pin-frogs or other reusable mechanics.

It is a balancing act in terms of a flower's impact on the environment. "There's the way the flowers are grown—are they organic, are they pesticide-free, are they free of toxins—and then the other component is, are they local," Ms. Venokur explains, noting the environmental effects of flying and/or trucking flowers long distances. "We really do try to figure out what our options are and what's the best of what we can do," she says. "It certainly hasn't been black or white."

In addition to working with area growers, Ms. Venokur also sources some of her flowers through Organic Bouquet's wholesale arm. Locally, she says, not all production is organic; many growers are employing best practices. In the case of flowering branches, for instance, she says growers have told her that pesticides are essential to avoid losing an entire crop.

"We do pay a little bit of a premium sometimes," she says of the eco-friendly products. "When I buy from local farms, I'm not really paying a premium. When I'm shipping organic flowers in, then it gets a little more expensive."

Christine Saunders, owner of **The Spiraled Stem Floral Design**, a wedding and event design business in Anaheim Hills, Calif., changed her business's focus in mid-April to promote more environmentally friendly flowers and practices as part of a personal mission, as well. She recycles cardboard and vases and is trying to forgo the newspaper packing that is abundant when she purchases at the Los Angeles Flower Market. She also has proposed creating a network with fellow area wedding florists to share their inventories of large props and vases.

Ms. Saunders, who doesn't have a retail storefront but advertises her services at www.thespiraledstem.com, has signed up with Organic Bouquet's wholesale program, and she's been seeking out other organic growers and suppliers. In some cases, she says, she is finding either small quantities of product or a lack of awareness of green-label certifications.

"I don't think it's currently on the average consumer's radar," she says. "Especially when I ask the wholesalers and they're not aware of it. If the consumer's not asking for it, then the wholesaler's not asking for it, and it's not being provided in the large scale. I think that's just getting started."

a question of promotion

Those involved with labels targeting the North American marketplace say they are working to expand awareness of such labels among consumers. **Augusto Solano**, president of **Asociflores**, the **Colombian Association of Flower Exporters**, says the association is working to get its Florverde label (see "Green Labels for Flowers," Page 52) recognized by more end consumers. The label is showing up on bouquets in mass-market outlets such as New York-based Price Chopper stores and in Publix Super Markets, for example. Mr. Solano says the 167 farms participating in Florverde, which turned 10 last year, account for 30 percent of flowers sold to U.S. consumers. "In the case of the U.S. market, not many labels can offer more than 700 million stems of certified flowers per year," he says.

Mr. Winslow says SCS recently entered a licensing agreement with **MasterTag** to create in-store merchandising materials, stem tags, sleeves, signage and other items to promote the Veriflora label. "We have approximately 600 million stems somewhere in the pipeline, either being grown or somewhere in the distribution channel. So we're hitting that critical mass, where now it's really making an impact," Mr. Winslow says.

Sierra Flower Trading, Ltd., in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, has promoted its own Sierra Eco brand as a way to highlight the practices of such certifications as FLP, Florverde and Veriflora without confusing customers with multiple labels. The company is a Veriflora-certified handler supplying wholesale florists in Canada and was among those that helped develop Veriflora.

President and CEO **Tom Leckman** says about 35 percent of Sierra Flower Trading's products are certified right now. "Our commitment, which was made in 2000, that we would buy 100 percent certified products really has had to wait for the Veriflora standard to come together because [flower certifications] never applied to North American product," he describes. "If I had to guess, I would say it will probably be another five to 10 years until 100 percent of our product is certified."

The company has seen a slight price differential in flowers that carry such certifications, he says, "but there's also a very big difference in the impact on people's lives—not necessarily the consumers but certainly on the people who produce them."

"I think many more organizations are stopping now and not just asking the price," he says, "but trying to understand what are the real costs."

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