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Sustainable Flowers FAQ

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SUSTAINABLE FLOWERS FAQ

Flowers add life and color to big events and small moments. Bringing nature inside, artistically arranged flowers transform a room from boring to welcoming, which is why we put them in the middle of our dining tables and the front of our halls. Cut flowers come from a wide variety of sources, and, like food, some of those sources are sustainable, while others are environmentally destructive. The information below gives a quick summary of sustainability considerations in the flower business.

Where Do Cut Flowers Come From?
Most American florists buy cut flowers imported from South America. Favorable trade deals have grown flower farming into a huge industry in Latin America. In 1991, the Andean Trade Preference Act lifted duties on flowers grown in Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Suddenly, inexpensive roses, carnations and lilies were popping up in US florists and supermarkets. The market has continued to grow.

But the hidden costs are steep. Once a vibrant part of American agriculture, US fresh-flower farmers couldn’t compete with the low-priced commodity flowers being shipped in, and most domestic farmers went out of business. Today, only about a third of our fresh flowers are grown in the US.

What’s wrong with Imported Flowers?
Imported cut flowers may give us cheaper blooms, but their damage to human and environmental health is high. The industry relies on low wages. Child labor in the South American fields has decreased over the years due to international scrutiny, but workers can still be as young as school-aged.

Workers, water and land are exposed to significant amounts of chemicals. Herbicides and insecticides are standard in the trade, because blemished petals and stems redeem no profit. Flowers are a fragile commodity. To keep them intact for their long trip north, workers dunk them in preservatives and fungicides to maintain their look. Trade in flowers across borders sets up an inherent incentive to use chemicals, as governments don’t allow agricultural products into their countries that haven’t been treated for foreign pests. The USDA checks flowers for insects and disease, but not for chemical residues.

These chemicals get into the air in the fields, in the greenhouses and in the flower processing areas (some operators provide respirators for workers, some don’t.) And the chemicals remain on the flowers that wind up in vases in the middle of the
dining tables. DFR or “dislodgeable foliar residues” transfer from plants to people by simply handling imported flowers.

To keep flowers fresh in transit, flower growers and exporters use cold chain distribution, keeping processing and storage areas, airline cargo holds, delivery trucks and display cases refrigerated to around 34 degrees. The near-freezing temperatures ensure that cut flowers stay fresh, but stomp a big carbon footprint in the process.

**What’s right about Local Flowers?**

Local flowers offer an abundant variety of color and bloom choice, because the flowers don’t travel far from the field to the vase. Commodity imports are restricted to heartier stock, which is the reason mass-market arrangements tend to be monotonous.

Local flower farmers harvest what’s in season, so the palette of flower arrangements reflects nature’s authentic beauty in the moment.

Local flowers grown in open fields provide habitat and food for pollinators. Butterflies, bees and birds all benefit from field-grown flowers. Plant and animal life up and down the food chain, in turn, benefit from the pollinators’ activity. Native flowers are even more beneficial, since plants naturally occurring in the ecosystem attract a wider array of pollinators.

Local flower farmers typically don’t use a heavy load of chemicals, since their blooms travel shorter distances and aren’t subject to customs regulations. Most use sustainable growing practices, such as Integrated Pest Management.

The short distances local flowers travel means less of a carbon footprint from field to vase: shorter time in refrigerated storage, fewer miles on the road, no time in an airplane.

Local flower farms provide employment for the community. They are an important educational resource in the community, hosting tours, encouraging inquiry into horticulture and sharing knowledge with florists and others in the industry. Many farmers participate in weekly farmers markets, allowing individuals to not only buy small quantities of fresh cut flowers, but also to get to know their growers and their seasonal offerings.

Transparency inherent in local sourcing promises integrity in the buying process.

**Are there other sources of sustainable flowers?**

Yes, a number of American flower farmers participate in third-party certification programs (Veriflora, Bloomcheck, Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance) which ensure that the cut flowers they sell have been sustainably grown. While the certification programs are used by both domestic and imported flower growers, American-grown flowers have an
overall reduced environmental impact primarily because of the shorter distance from
grower to buyer.

What should I look for when buying conscientiously-created flower
arrangements?

First, ensure the florist you’re buying from is using locally grown flowers and
greens whenever possible. When not available, sustainably-certified domestic flowers
are a sound option.

Secondly, seek out florists who routinely incorporate environmentally
conscientious practices into their work - avoiding floral foam and minimizing landfilled
waste are two key practices.