




**PART OF THE LANDSCAPE** Rosamina, a Colombian flower grower certified by the Rainforest Alliance, uses sustainability practices that support both the environment and the community. In addition to recycling, water conservation, and the preservation and restoration of native plants around the flower fields and greenhouses, Rosamina also provides the community with good jobs that come with benefits.





The benefits of sustainably grown flowers go beyond the environment.

# Going Green

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

**W**ouldn't it be nice to personally visit some of the farms that supply your flowers? That way, you could give customers assurance that the flowers were grown with due respect for the environment and the farm workers.

You might also find that visiting the farms would bring other benefits — among them, an excitement about the materials you work with. “When you go to the farms, it’s a total game changer,” says Cherrie Silverman, AIFD, AAF, owner of Cherry Blossoms Florist in Westminster, Colorado. During her farm visits, she was inspired by “the passion, the dedication, the love that these people have for what they do — and the pride.”





PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHERRIE SILVERMAN

**HIGH STANDARDS** Cherrie Silverman, AIFD, AAF, owner of Cherry Blossoms Florist in Westminster, Colorado, was inspired by the sustainability practices she saw while visiting flower farms in South and Central America.

Over the years, Silverman has participated in farm tours sponsored by FloraLink, a program that facilitates direct buying from flower farms in South and Central America for both wholesale and retail florists. On the FloraLink tours, Silverman was impressed with the high standards of sustainability, in terms of respectful care of both the environment and the farm workers. She visited farms that give generous benefits to employees, from hot meals to dental and medical care and stipends allocated to home buying.

“That’s really important to me,” Silverman says. “It makes me want to do business with that farm.”

### Consumers Care

Environmental and social sustainability is increasingly important to consumers, too.

According to an international survey by the data analytics company Nielsen, 81 percent of consumers feel strongly that companies should help to improve the environment. As many as 73 percent say they are ready to change their buying habits if that would reduce their impact on the environment.

Those sentiments are even stronger among Millennials, who outnumber Baby Boomers as the largest segment of the adult population, according to the Pew Research Center. About 85 percent of Millennials say it is important for companies to implement environmentally friendly practices, Nielsen notes.

As the marketing trend gains currency, it’s clear that customers are responding. It’s estimated that U.S. consumers spent \$150 billion on sustainable products last year, according to Nielsen.

That equates to a large marketing opportunity for the floral industry, whose products are already popular with younger generations.

### Mass Markets Pave the Way

While sustainability is just beginning to take a higher profile in the supply chain that brings flowers and greens to independent retail florists, it is already well established in the mass market. Walk into any grocery store and you will find a plethora of products labeled as organic, fair trade, or environmentally friendly — from packaged goods to produce and yes, even flowers.



It's not hard to see why. In grocery stores, flowers are considered part of the produce department. Crossover from organic and fair-trade labeling for fruits and vegetables makes the transition to flowers logical and intuitive for customers and managers alike.

Then there is the sheer leverage, the market power, and the resources available to mass marketers to implement a sustainability program. "Some of the mass marketers, Kroger for example, have a whole sustainability team as part of the organization," notes Melissa Nickell, marketing director for Sun Valley Floral Farms in Arcata, California.

A short supply chain also helps. Since mass marketers can buy directly from flower farms, traceability is not an issue. Grocery-store flowers are commonly sold as grower bunches. It's relatively easy, then, to stick a label on the bouquet sleeve that gives customers assurance all the flowers in the bunch come with the same sustainability credentials.

### Retail Florists Can Also Go Green

Retail florists, on the other hand, often sell arrangements of flowers that may have been sourced from different farms and even different countries. Florists may not know where their flowers come from.

And in a flower shop, the context and presentation encourage customers to think of flowers not as a commodity, but as an expression. "In a supermarket, you're walking through and buying what catches your eye," says Nickell. "In a flower shop, you walk in and say something like, 'I need to say, 'I'm sorry,' or 'I love you.' Can you help?'"

Under those circumstances, the provenance of the flowers can recede into the background unless the florist promotes it as an added value.

Even if it's not always top of mind, sustainable sourcing could have even greater value when flowers are a social expression, versus a casual everyday purchase, says Jacob Davignon, who leads a global team for key markets and retail at Rainforest Alliance, one of the best-known certifiers of sustainable farm products. For instance, compare flowers with diamonds. In



**LUNCH BREAK** A subsidized hot lunch (costing workers the equivalent of about 10 cents in U.S. dollars) is one of many benefits designed to attract and retain a skilled, loyal workforce at Colombian rose grower Alexandra Farms, certified by Florverde Sustainable Flowers (FSF).



**WORK AND PLAY** Many certifying organizations have standards in place that extend benefits to the people who live near certified farms. For example, Florverde Sustainable Flowers' agenda embraces programs that directly benefit children near the farms it certifies. Here, children participate in after-school activities as the result of a joint effort between Florverde and a local municipality.





**SUPPORTING WOMEN** The workforce on Colombian flower farms includes many women. The culture of sustainability — along with a competitive labor market — has led to benefits for female workers, including daycare for children.



**HELLO, GOODBYE** At Alexandra Farms, mesh mitts are applied by hand to rose buds. The fine mesh protects the flowers from many types of pests, even spores of botrytis mold, reducing the need for chemical pesticides or fungicides.

the market for diamonds, “conflict free” has become one of the standard criteria for purchases — driven by demand from Millennials and enabled by blockchain technology that enables traceability from mine to store.

Diamonds and flowers are both gifts that you give with love in your heart, says Davignon. “I wouldn’t want to give my girlfriend a bouquet of roses knowing that there were terrible practices going on at the farm where they were grown, and I don’t think she would want to receive them knowing that,” he says. An assurance of sustainability is one way of knowing that your meaningful gift carries with it social compassion and environmental responsibility.

### **Quality and Sustainability Go Hand in Hand**

Silverman believes that when farms embrace sustainability, the result is better product. “It’s a whole cycle,” she says. “When the farmer really cares about all aspects of it, it shows every step of the way.”

There is also a practical reason why growers who embrace social and environmental responsibility produce quality products. Most take part in green certification programs, from Rainforest Alliance to BloomCheck and Florverde Sustainable Flowers (FSF).

These programs require a third-party review of standards and practices, and many are also geared to help with quality and profitability.

To meet the certification standards, growers must keep detailed records and pay close attention to aspects of management that might otherwise have been neglected. They are required to marshal resources such as energy and water more efficiently, slash the cost of pesticides, and also reduce shrink — all of which results in savings that help offset their investment in certification measures.

Notably, implementation of socially conscientious employment policies can make for a committed, responsible, and experienced workforce whose interests coincide with good environmental practices.

Sun Valley, a leader in sustainability in the U.S., has pursued a number of



certifications, among them Veriflora, BloomCheck, and Rainforest Alliance.

They've found that among the benefits of integrating sustainability in their practices is that it attracts — and helps retain — workers, who these days want to feel good about their job and employer.

"Our headquarters are based in a very environmentally conscious community in Northern California, so I think it is inherent to the people who work on our farm," says Nickell.

The bottom line is that care of the environment entails a level of expertise and oversight as well as improved business management practices and an appeal to workers.

## Telling the Story

When retail marketers commit to sustainable sourcing, they generally do it

for two reasons, says Davignon. The first is risk mitigation. If a story emerges in the media that links your product to practices that hurt people or the environment, your reputation is protected if your own supply chain is certified.

On the flip side, when you source your product sustainably, you open up a world of possibilities for positive storytelling that links your business to social and environmental benefits. The Kroger Company, for example, created a film in partnership with Rainforest Alliance, called "The Journey of the Roses." It begins on a farm in Colombia and features interviews with happy workers who enjoy benefits including a daycare facility. The film then flashes forward to the making of the rose garland that is traditionally placed on the winning horse at the Kentucky Derby — a job that for

more than 30 years has been accomplished by a Kroger florist.

"That story really resonates with consumers in terms of certified and sustainable sourcing," says Davignon. A typical florist may not have the resources available to Kroger, but for those who are proactive about sustainability, storytelling — whether it's a blog, signage in stores, or a story in the local media — remains a potent marketing tool.

"We ask the retailers that we work with, 'What themes are meaningful to your consumer base?'" Davignon adds. "Is it deforesting, child welfare, gender equality? Because all of those components are included in the [Rainforest Alliance] standard, so it's always possible to craft a story that will resonate with customers."



**GOOD BUGS, BAD BUGS** You can't see them, but this greenhouse at Dramm Echter in California is alive with tiny wasps that feed on leafminer larvae, a pest that can wreak havoc on gerbera foliage. The wasps are just one part of a system of biological controls, or integrated pest management, that helps protect the flowers from insect damage. "We haven't used a commercial pesticide for years," says company president Bob Echter.



**SEAL OF SUSTAINABILITY** Sun Valley Floral Farms in Arcata, California, boasts several green certifications. The farm is certified by Veriflora, BloomCheck and the Rainforest Alliance, whose seal is seen on this bouquet of tulips.

PAUL SWENSON PHOTOGRAPHY



**GOOD REPUTATION** (Left) Teresa Sabankaya, owner of Bonny Doon Garden Co. in Santa Cruz, California, has been selling locally grown flowers since she started her floral design business more than 20 years ago. Her customers come back again and again because they know they are getting sustainably grown flowers, she says.

**A NATURAL ARRAY** (Right) Nestled at the bottom of a valley in Fallbrook, California, Kendall Farms has a high-tech packing, production and propagation facility where 2,000 solar panels supply all the farm's power needs. The farm cultivates waxflower, proteas, kangaroo paws, and a variety of foliage. It also uses solar power to grow 500 pounds of food a year for local families in need.



### How Does Local Fit In?

For many florists, especially in the trend-sensitive wedding market, “local” is an easier idea to promote than “sustainably grown”— and one that customers respond to.

“When I started my business in 1999, I would tell people, ‘These sweet peas are grown by a lady just 14 miles down the road,’” says Teresa Sabankaya, owner of Bonny Doon Garden Co., a studio flower shop in Santa Cruz, California.

“Back then, it was a foreign concept,” says Sabankaya. “They’d be like, ‘Okay, whatever.’ But now I believe all of my customers come to me because they know that that’s my reputation. They know they are getting good local product, sustainably grown, supporting our local economy here.”

California’s central coast is an area particularly rich in possibilities for sourcing from local flower farms. But flower farms are popping up all over the country, from Oklahoma to Minnesota, thanks in part to proponents of the Slow Flowers™ movement and its founder Debra Prinzing.

“We’re trending up,” says Prinzing. The USDA’s 2020 Floriculture Crop Summary, published last year, showed that the number of U.S. farms growing

cut flowers and cut greens in 2020 increased about 14 percent from 2019.

The growth was not only in numbers but also in the distribution of those farms throughout the country. “California is still by far the largest source of domestic flowers,” says Prinzing. “And they do it well. But, because people want local, they’re also looking to small-scale farmer-florists and micro-growers in their region. That is where this explosion is taking place, to the point where we now have commercial-scale flower sources available in virtually all 50 states at certain times of the year.

“The reality is that domestic flowers are never going to be 100 percent of our flower choices,” Prinzing says. “Imports are too strong. But I do think people want choice, and more than anything they just want to know where the flowers they’re buying are grown. So, that’s an opportunity for florists to differentiate themselves with their customers, to tell a different story.”

### Sustainable with Fringe Benefits

Sustainability was always part of what Sabankaya’s customers valued about buying local. In addition to appealing to her customers, the movement has also benefited florists in other ways.



In the current era of supply-chain challenges, the relationships that Silverman has developed with suppliers have positioned her well. “The relationships that I have with the people that I buy from are as important as the flowers,” she says.

She knows her suppliers and they know her — and she has the assurance that they share her passion for quality in every sense of the word. She credits great product and the positive stories about how the flowers are grown with the growth of her business.

“My business is growing so much, I can’t keep up with it,” Silverman says. “It’s because of the product that I offer. It’s beautiful, and I’m able to offer it at a good price.” At the same time, she says, the product is a reflection of how it is grown: with love, pride, and respect for workers and for the environment. 🌿

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**STUCK UP** A method as simple as using sticky tape, seen here winding through a hoop house of Lisianthus at Sun Valley Floral Farms’ Oxnard, California, location, offers an environmentally friendly alternative to pesticides. Adding garlic to the water also helps keep off the plants.



**HIDDEN HIGH TECH** Solidago is among the many crops grown by Mellano & Company at its two locations in northern San Diego County, California, an area where water conservation is a particularly pressing concern. Wireless sensors monitor soil moisture in the field so irrigation needs can be fine-tuned at a moment’s notice. Certified by BloomCheck, Mellano also relies on integrated pest management, and it recycles all cardboard, plastic, and organic waste on the farm. “We’ve been here almost 50 years,” says CEO Mike Mellano. “We intend to stay and continue to farm, and you can’t do that if you abuse the ground.”