

OCEAN FREIGHT STEAMS AHEAD

> Importers in Miami continue to build a reliance on ocean freight for some flowers, especially ahead of floral holidays when the demand for stems is greatest.

The prevalence of ocean freight was particularly apparent during this year's Valentine's Day rush when PortMiami saw double-digit, year-over-year growth in the numbers of stems arriving by ship, according to the Association of Floral Importers of Florida (AFIF). While the number of flowers coming by sea still pales in comparison to air transport (a 2021 survey by the International Fresh Produce Association found that 28 percent of the floral industry is shipping flowers by ocean), sea containers are becoming an important and consistent part of the industry.

"Now, it has become part of the industry," says Steve Daum, director of Superflor Technologies for Floralife, a division of Smithers Oasis. "No way will it replace the airlines, but it isn't going away either. Ocean freight has to work in combined step with the airlines in order for us to have the product we need. It's about working in connection with the needs and logistics and adding to the industry."

The significant volume of flowers required to fill a container means ocean freight plays an important role in

meeting the increased demand ahead of floral holidays, says Christine Boldt, executive vice president of AFIF.

By the Numbers

More flowers were shipped by sea this year ahead of Valentine's Day than last year, according to AFIF. The association reported that 55 million stems entered PortMiami from Jan. 16 to Feb. 5, a 41 percent increase from the same period in 2021, when 39 million stems came through the port.

By comparison, 1.4 billion stems landed at the Miami International Airport from Jan. 1 to Feb. 15, a 17 percent increase from the same period in 2021, according to the airport. The airport receives 91 percent of all flowers imported to the U.S., it says.

Full Steam Ahead

Ocean freight has trended upwards for years because of the logistical costs of air, including competition for space on planes and the need for storage space before and after the flight, Boldt explains. "But the pandemic pushed it further," she says.

With bottlenecks throughout the supply chain, ocean freight isn't a less expensive option, but it offers a solution to the lack of space on planes, Boldt

says. Still, she cautions that there is a risk because of the volume of product in one container. If something goes wrong — from malfunctions with the temperature-controlled shipping containers to the discovery of a pest — it equates to a huge loss of product.

Quality Control

As the use of ocean freight increases, the science behind preparing and caring for the stems during the journey is critical, Daum says. He has worked with growers and transport companies to perfect the logistical timeline and checklists to ensure stems coming by sea still have a 10-day vase life.

"The quality of the flowers is found in the adherence to the protocols we've produced for a well-grown flower to move through the systems," Daum says.

The quality control process for flowers shipped by sea is different than those used for flowers shipped by air — and it works, Daum says. "People are doing things well," he says. "They have bought more infrastructure and are following the steps. There is technology being developed and people are using and enjoying the results."

He points to the outcome of Valentine's Day as an example of success using ocean freight. After all, red roses are one of the flowers known to travel well by sea.

"This year was hugely successful," Daum says of Valentine's Day. "We had a high-quality flower, and sell-through was excellent, with stems lasting 10 days."

Boldt also echoed that the bottom line is about the quality of the flower. While importers must consider the method for importing, she says that most buyers don't.

"They aren't concerned with how it got here," she says. "They are just buying their product. As long as the product is as fresh as possible, and it is what the customer wants, does it really matter how it was transported?"

Sarah Sampson is a contributing writer for *Floral Management* magazine.



SHUTTERSTOCK.COM/AVIGATOR FORTUNER