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Make a green statement with your next bouquet

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

Isn't it about time cut flowers went back to their roots?

Natural and biodegradable, flowers were a "green" product before that concept even existed. But the growth of cut flowers in recent years into a \$40 billion industry has relied heavily on chemical pesticides and fertilizers, as well as far-flung global production. Now the green-living movement has finally reached the vase on your dining-room table. Eco-friendly and socially-responsible flowers are becoming more available, stimulated by blossoming consumer demand.

Whether you're sending a Mother's Day bouquet across the country (don't forget, it's May 11th!), or just adding some color and fragrance to your home, follow this guide to make your cut flowers as green as nature intended.

Hold the chemicals



Julie Notarianni / The Seattle Times

Green blooms resources

VeriFlora: www.veriflora.com

TransFair USA: www.transfairusa.org

Organic Bouquet: www.organicbouquet.com

Pesticides, fertilizers and preservatives that help keep flowers beautiful can harm workers or end up in waterways, and traces may remain on the flowers when you buy them.

TerraBella Flowers: www.terrabellaflowers.com

Trudy's Floral Design: www.trudysflowers.com

Puget Sound farmers markets: www.pugetsoundfresh.org

In Costa Rica, more than half the surveyed workers growing flowers and ferns for arrangements reported at least one symptom of pesticide exposure, according to the Center for Ethics and Toxics. A sample of roses tested by the Environmental Working Group found up to 50 times the pesticide residues allowed in food.

In response to concerns about the toxics used for growing cut flowers, several programs have sprouted up.

Scientific Certification Systems, an independent California-based company, operates VeriFlora, the most prominent label for green and socially responsible cut flowers and potted plants. VeriFlora includes criteria for sustainable crop production and product safety, but makes allowances if a grower cannot yet reach full organic production, because of a limited supply of organic bulbs, for example.

Other environmental programs for cut flowers include the U.S. Department of Agriculture organic seal and labels originating in the major flower export countries of Colombia and Ecuador.

Consider the pickers

To improve conditions for flower pickers and other industry workers around the world, nonprofit TransFair USA expanded its "fair-trade" program to cut flowers last year. A portion of each purchase supports community development projects for flower workers, such as housing, health clinics and scholarships. Flower growers certified in this program also must have high environmental standards. Look for the black-and-white Fair Trade Certified logo, already a familiar sight on coffee, tea and chocolate.

The VeriFlora program also helps flower workers internationally by supporting their communities and guaranteeing the right to organize.

Special delivery

Americans spend about \$2 billion on flowers and plants for Mother's Day, with many of those ordered long-distance by phone or online.

For the big day, consider sending Mom a sustainable bouquet.

Online retailers offering VeriFlora or certified organic flowers include Organic Bouquet/Organic Style and California Organic Flowers. Sam's Club members can now order Fair Trade Certified roses (and carnations in bulk) on the Sam's Web site.

In search of green blooms

For local flower shopping, your options have also greened up. Whole Foods and Trader Joe's stores in the Seattle area carry limited supplies of Veri-Flora flowers or Fair Trade Certified roses. Supermarkets now sell about half of all cut flowers, and eco-labels are expected to soon begin showing up regularly at mainstream grocery chains.

You will also find a few area florists that offer locally-grown organic flowers in season, such as TerraBella Flowers in north Seattle and Trudy's Floral Design downtown.

Even if your florist doesn't advertise sustainable flowers, ask what it can provide, especially if you need a large order for a wedding or party. In fact, the "green weddings" trend has provided a welcome cross-pollenization for the green flower movement.

This summer and fall, your best bet for eco-blooms may be your neighborhood farmers market. Many flower vendors at these markets use few or no chemicals, and shopping there also greatly reduces the environmental effects of transportation.

How much green?

The price difference between sustainable and standard flowers can vary widely. For example, at a Whole Foods store in Seattle, fair-trade roses sold for nearly double the price of other roses, but organic and regular tulips had the same price.

Of course, the closest, cheapest and greenest cut flowers could be right outside your back door. For tips on raising chemical-free blossoms, search online for "growing organic flowers."

Whether you're buying flowers at a store, ordering online or growing your own, you can make a green statement, one bloom at a time.

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