

# Say it with flowers

*By Jeremy Seabrook, New Statesman; 2/16/2004, Vol. 133 Issue 4675, p22-23, 2p*

## **The blooms you buy on St Valentine's Day are likely to have been cultivated overseas, by women working in harsh, often illegal conditions.**

The language of flowers may once have been about horticulture and romance. Today, it has become a dialect of industrialism. Flowers, which once grew and bloomed, have become floral products. They are prepared, harvested and despatched by cheap, ill-regulated and exploited labour all over the world.

Flowers have become part of the "just-in-time" economy. The bouquets offered to sweethearts on Valentine's Day, or brought on hospital visits, the exotic arrangements on show in a hotel lobby or a company boardroom, are usually grown on plantations around the world. Supermarket chains in the west telephone their orders for the same day to growers in Kenya, Colombia or Zambia. And in serving the imperious demand for instant provision, workers on flower farms, mainly women employed on short-term contracts, are poisoned by pesticides and exposed to the chemicals that preserve the blooms.

Intensive cultivation is not new. Ramesh owns four acres of land in Uttar Pradesh in northern India, the largest rose-growing area in the world outside Bulgaria. He grows *deshi* (indigenous) roses, which are of ancient origin and sweetly scented. Harvested in March, they are placed in a sealed metal vessel, which is then set upon a slow-burning fire. No water is added: liquid comes from the petals. They are boiled for four hours, then sold to wholesale perfume manufacturers, mostly in the Gulf.

Ramesh dislikes the flower industry. "Roses you buy at traffic lights or see on restaurant tables are not roses. They are artificial flowers. They are grown for cosmetic purposes." The technology of farmed flowers is concentrated in the west — particularly the Netherlands, still the biggest exporter in the world, the US and Germany — but the blooms are increasingly cultivated in places where cheap labour, as well as natural temperature and light, reduce costly inputs such as fertiliser, pesticide and materials used for fumigation and preservation. The farms occupy land that only yesterday produced food. In theory, the foreign exchange earned from flowers will pay for food imports; but flowers, too, must be nurtured, and require expensive chemicals, most of which come from outside the producing countries.

Blooms are typically harvested, de-leafed, semi-dehydrated in refrigeration units, steeped in chemicals, tightly packed in boxes — sometimes by packing machinery — and sent in refrigerated trucks to the airport; they are usually chemically rehydrated at the supermarkets and florists where they are sold. In the weeks preceding St Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, women on the plantations in Africa and South America frequently work 60 hours a week.

"Workers on plantations don't love what they produce," Ramesh says. "For us, it is different — roses have for centuries been part of our lives. [But] when fields become factories, you might as well buy paper flowers made by children in the slums."

Gerberas — first identified in the Transvaal in 1880, improved in England in the 1890s, brought to perfection in California and Florida — are now grown mainly in Colombia, where they are treated with chemical growth retardants. Tesco, which like many supermarket chains in the west deals directly with growers in the south, demands a "vase life" of between seven and 14 days.

New flower varieties are constantly being produced in Europe and the US. Flower genes are manipulated to make them resistant to insects, to make them last longer and to increase output. Recently, the first genetically altered blue carnation has appeared in Colombia, achieved by adding the genes of the petunia to the plant. Royalties must be paid to companies that patent the new varieties. Transnationals have entered the lucrative business. In 1998, Dole Food Company bought 23 farms in Colombia and Ecuador; through its subsidiaries, it is now the largest grower of fresh flowers in the world.

The workers' pay is low — about \$1.50 per day in Kenya — their hours of work are long, their employment mostly casual. They get little instruction in handling dangerous substances, some of which are banned in the west. They move between the extremes of greenhouses and refrigerators. Many are at risk from respiratory diseases, eye problems, muscular pains and, in some cases, severe disability. Benefits and healthcare are rarely provided.

An international code of conduct for the production of cut flowers was established in 1999. Responsible producers insist that the growing of flowers ought to be environmentally friendly — only "acceptable" chemicals and fertilisers should be used, a computerised drip-irrigation system employed, and workers issued with protective clothing. Progress has been made, particularly in phasing out methyl bromide as a soil fumigant: under an agreement drawn up by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the UN Environment

Programme, by 2015 developing countries will be helped to find substitutes to this ozone-depleting chemical.

But a Canadian report reveals that the run-off of water which contains chemical residues continues to contaminate drinking water and natural watercourses, with excessive water sometimes being drawn off. The waste — discarded blooms, stalks and unwanted foliage — may also be dangerous, and is often fed to cattle. A high level of birth defects has been detected among the children of female workers on the flower farms in the savannah around Bogotá in Colombia.

Worldwide, flowers are a \$50bn business, although much of the trade is within countries. The Colombian trade is worth more than \$550m, Ecuador's almost as much. Kenya earned more than \$100m in foreign exchange from flowers in 2000; horticultural products are now its fourth-largest generator of foreign exchange, after tea, coffee and tourism. But at a conference in Nairobi in 2002, organised by the Kenya Human Rights Commission, environmentalists complained that Lake Naivasha, a freshwater lake close to many of the farms, is in danger of severe pollution, threatening the habitat of the hippopotamus.

Pressure is growing on the industry to guarantee labour and environmental standards. Failing that, what is wrong with a bunch of home-grown daffodils? Alternatively, why not a posy of garden flowers? I have at least 15 species in bloom in mid-February, including irises, snowdrops, crocuses, winter pansies, miniature cyclamen, primroses, japonica, Chinese witch-hazel (wonderfully scented), hellebore, viburnum and corylus. Yes, say it with flowers — but try to use the right language.