



## Where Do Florist Flowers Come From?

by Marilyn Loser

2017 October 4

Our recent low temperatures and high winds have mostly wiped out the flowers in my yard. Two tubs of protected petunias are holding their own. Out in the flower beds there are still a few colorful chrysanthemums, sturdy autumn joy, and orange California poppies. Straggly pink cosmos and yellow Maximillian sunflowers are bending over in the wind as I write.

It's no wonder I slowly stroll through the flower departments of grocery stores starting this time of the year! I started wondering where all the cut flowers come from. Eight years ago I had the good fortune to visit the Rosadex Rose greenhouses in Ecuador. At that time they exported one million blooms (they refer to them as stems) worldwide each year.

Not so long ago, Americans got their flowers from neighborhood florists, who bought blooms grown on U.S. farms or imported from the Netherlands. The 800 Florals website explains that America's taste in flowers is shifting from traditional mums and carnations to more unique specialty blooms and that their place of origin has been changing in recent years. California is still America's top cut flower producer, while Florida is second.

"These days, the bouquets that many Americans buy, typically at supermarkets, are grown, assembled and packaged overseas," reported John McQuaid in a 2010 Smithsonian Magazine article. The most recent data I could find at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website is for 2015. The top four countries exporting flowers to America were Colombia (694 million stems), Ecuador (189 million stems), Mexico (38 million stems), and the Netherlands (20 million stems).

The Rosadex greenhouse we visited in Ecuador was very near the equator. Their website states, "Only in the equator do roses grow perfectly straight. Ecuador is a great place to cultivate roses. Its real advantage is that they get natural light all year round, in addition that our roses are located at high altitude (9580 feet above sea level) in the lush volcano valley of Cayambe."

According to the Smithsonian article, in 1967 David Cheever, a graduate student at Colorado State University, wrote a paper suggesting that the savanna in the foothills of the Andes at about 8,700 feet altitude would be perfect for growing flowers. It had little temperature and light variation year around. Further, Bogota was just a three-hour flight from Miami -- closer to East Coast customers than California, the center of the U.S. flower industry. Cheever and some friends invested in Colombia and in 1969 began building the successful Floramerica business. They started with carnations.

I was surprised to learn that Columbia's flower exporting trade received an incentive from the U.S. in 1991. Columbia was "a country ravaged by political violence for most of the 20th century and by the

cocaine trade since the 1980s,” reports the Smithsonian. “To limit coca farming and expand job opportunities in Colombia, the U.S. government in 1991 suspended import duties on Colombian flowers. The results were dramatic, though disastrous for U.S. growers. In 1971, the United States produced 1.2 billion blooms of the major flowers (roses, carnations and chrysanthemums) and imported only 100 million. By 2003, the trade balance had reversed; the United States imported two billion major blooms and grew only 200 million.”

Flowers are perishable. How can they be harvested, processed, transported, and delivered to retail customers in a reasonable amount of time? I know when I cut a flower and put it in water, it lasts a few days – maybe a week. Keeping the blooms cold is the key explains McQuaid. Warehouses and trucks are kept at about 34 deg. Fahrenheit. In cold rooms, boxes containing flowers are attached to refrigeration units that infuse them with chilled air. Then they’re stacked on pallets, which are wrapped in plastic and loaded onto trucks and driven to Miami-bound planes. It takes about 48 hours for flowers to get from a field in Colombia to a warehouse in the United States, and one or two more days to reach a retailer.

But not all blooms make it into the hand of customers. The Statistic Brain website report that 45 % of all flowers grown for sale are discarded before they are ever sold!

*"If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly our whole life would change." Buddha*