Sustainable Cut-Flowers

A handy guide to key issues and good practice









The Sustainable Cut-Flower Project

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If you are a florist, flower buyer or someone who loves to have blooms around, this introductory guide is designed to offer you three things:

1. An overview of key issues regarding the sustainability of cut-flowers
2. Information so you can make informed decisions on how you source/use flowers
3. Details of where you can find out more and keep up to date with developments

Who we are



Dr David Bek is Reader in Sustainable Economies and **Dr Jill Timms** is Assistant Professor, both at the Centre for Business in Society, Coventry University, UK.

This project

We find the cut-flower industry fascinating and have been researching it for over a decade. Our current project is very timely for those working with flowers, for consumers and wider society, as it is about sustainability and the future of flowers and the planet.

Based at Coventry University, we have been asking '*what does a sustainable flower look like?*' We are interviewing florists up and down the country, attending international flower events, visiting farms in places such as Kenya, Lancashire and South Africa, and working closely with our Key Stakeholder Group.

Our Key Stakeholder Group

We have built up a strong network of collaborators from all parts of flower supply chains, which has allowed us to bring together people who would not normally cross paths. Our workshops to date, hosted firstly by Coventry University, then MM Flowers and in 2019 by Fleurametz in Aalsmeer, have been very effective in identifying sustainability challenges and together developing solutions. This leaflet aims to share useful insight for your own good practice.

Our dynamic network includes: the British Florist Association; Royal FloraHolland Auction; international large scale producers, such as Dümmen Orange; small scale producers, such as Flowers from the Farm; certification bodies, such as MPS and Fairtrade; large scale distributors and wholesalers, such as MM Flowers and Fleurametz; florists, such as Lavender Green, Petal and Twig; advocacy groups, such as Women Working Worldwide and Hivos; various supermarket buyers; and the Flower Council of Holland.

We are grateful to this network for their commitment, to colleagues at the University of Amsterdam and Newcastle University for collaborations, and to our Research Assistant (soon to be Dr) Nora Lanari.

Sustainability issues in flowers

The cut-flower market is worth over £2 billion in the UK, with over 7000 florists. 90% of our flowers are imported, and the global industry is worth over $55 billion. However, some parts of it have been linked to bad practices affecting workers, communities and the environment.

As pressure grows to address the global Climate Emergency, a sustainable flower industry – ***one that endures by positively contributing to people and planet*** - has never been more important.

Environmental concerns include:

- High carbon footprint of greenhouse heating and global transportation
- Chemical use to increase production and prolong life, such as in air transit
- Destruction of habitats/biodiversity
- Waste from plastics/other materials
- Uncontrolled wildflower harvesting
- Water use in drought-prone areas
- Contamination of land and water

Social and political concerns include:

- Low paid, precarious/uncontracted work, highly seasonal demand
- Health risks, such as fertility issues and miscarriage from chemical use
- Reduced water quality/availability
- Land rights prioritising companies
- Sexual harassment/discrimination
- Poor or no maternity rights and lack of safe childcare provision

Flower labels and standards

In response to these issues and more, parts of the industry have developed Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS). These include a range of labels and private certification schemes that focus on different aspects of production.

The idea is that buying certified flowers will help you manage the ethical, environmental and social impacts of your choices. Many other products already have such schemes, with business and consumers looking for them, such as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified wood and Fairtrade goods like bananas, wine, chocolate and coffee.

Is this relevant to florists?

Yes! A real change has occurred and people are now asking more about where their flowers and foliage come from and how they are grown. Florists are in an ideal position to inform customers about sustainability and tell positive stories about their flowers. This can build up lasting custom without necessarily costing more.

Many florists will already be selling some certified flowers, but a lack of information from suppliers can be problematic. Overleaf we provide a handy 'Pin-Up Guide' to some of the main labels, to help you buy sustainably and answer customer queries to your advantage.

Producer Case Study: Petal and Twig



Dr Angela Coulton is one of a growing number of florist-growers, using sustainable methods to supply her outdoor grown seasonal flowers for local markets, florists and weddings. She promotes **biodiversity** with pollinator friendly flowers and **non-chemical** pest controls, and her expanding business provides **local jobs.**

As an experienced florist with a background in environmental policy, she knows the challenges of **sourcing** sustainable flowers and meeting the needs of brides. When buying additional flowers they are selected based on social and environmental impacts using **labels** as a guide. Angela is a member of **Flowers from the Farm** and is working with us to develop a recognised scheme for sustainably grown British flowers.

Your pin-up guide to some major labels and standards in flower production

	Label	Name	Description	3rd party Audit ?	Further Information
Environmental		**British Ornamental Plants Producers (BOPP)**	• Developed by the Horticulture Trades Association (HTA) • Best environmental practice promoted for growers, packers, and growing medium manufacturers	Y	https://bit.ly/BOPPcert
		FlorEcuador Certified	• Comprehensive certification scheme focussing on environmental sustainability in the Ecuadorian floriculture industry	Y	https://florecuador.com/en
		Flowers from the Farm	• Not-for-profit association of British cut-flower growers and grower-florists • Currently a label or network rather than a standard, sharing best practice on sustainable growing • Promotes locally-grown, seasonal flowers as an alternative to importing, to lower carbon footprint	N	https://www.flowersfromthefarm.co.uk/
		Global GAP	• International certification scheme that can be adapted to the floriculture sector and is often an export requirement for growers in the Global South • Ensures good agricultural practices, promoting environmental sustainability	Y	https://bit.ly/GGAPflowers
Social & Environmental		**EHPEA**	• Non-governmental, not-for-profit organisation of the Ethiopian flower sector • Included criteria of both social and environmental sustainability	Y	https://ehpea.org/
		Florverde Sustainable Flowers	• Independent social and environmental standard for the Colombian flower sector	Y	https://florverde.org/
		Kenya Flower Council	• Social and environmental sustainability standard developed by and for the Kenyan floriculture industry, including training as well as regular independent auditing	Y	http://kenyaflowercouncil.org
		MPS	• Private Dutch organisation affiliated with the auction house Royal FloraHolland • Manages a very well established suite of detailed certificates relating to environmental and/or social aspects of horticultural sustainability	Y	www.my-mps.com/en/certificates
		Fairtrade	• International and well-known non-profit organisation, where flowers are one part of their offering • Fairtrade sales generate an additional premium invested in worker-chosen community projects • Focus on working conditions, worker and environmental protection in developing countries	Y	www.fairtrade.org.uk
		Rainforest Alliance	• International non-profit organisation, focused on promoting social and environmental sustainability through flower farms compliance with the requirements of the Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard	Y	www.rainforest-alliance.org
		Veriflora Sustainably Grown	• International certification programme for the floriculture industry that fosters social as well as environmental sustainability	Y	http://bit.ly/verifloraflowers
Social		**Waitrose Foundation**	• Foundation funded by the British retailer Waitrose, a label rather than guaranteeing any standard • A percentage of Foundation flower sales is put towards local community projects	N	http://bit.ly/waitrosefoundationflowers

* **REMEMBER:** These are only examples. Look on your packaging, talk to your suppliers or seek ones that offer information and choice. **Our key A, B, C: A. Ask** where the flowers are from**. B. Buy** seasonal, local, low carbon, with positive impacts. **C. Certificates** can indicate a sustainability focus.

Questioning flower labels

As you can see from your 'Pin-Up Guide', there are many flower standards schemes and they can be difficult to compare. Two main questions to ask about are:

1. What is the focus? We divided the schemes into three categories – social, environmental and those that do both. This is important as not all flower labels are standards. A scheme that only donates to the community around a farm might be doing good, but it does not tell us about chemical use or employee welfare e.g. Waitrose Foundation.

2. How robust is the scheme? We note which are audited, as some are only membership or philanthropic. Audits though might have different frequencies or standards or approaches to any violations.

Although it can seem daunting, you are now armed with some basic knowledge of standards. We have also provided sources for finding out more or see our project website.

Wholesaler Case Study: Fleurametz

This member of our stakeholder group has already enacted new sustainable practices. After a flower standards workshop, Manager Ian McClellan changed the webshop so certifications are displayed and florists will be able to search on this basis. Being able to make more informed choices benefits buyers and can help support the more sustainable farms.



Are certificates still useful?

Our research shows that although problematic, this form of (private) regulation can raise expectations and be a step to improvement. Buying certified supports growers trying to be sustainable, and if demand for these flowers grows, practice will improve and schemes become more robust.

A change that will make these schemes important for every florist is explained below. Give yourself a flying start. Pin-up your guide and talk to suppliers about flower availability.

The Floriculture Sustainability Initiative (FSI) 2020

Initiated in 2012 by stakeholders in the global flower industry, the ambition is to have 90% of flowers and plants responsibly produced and traded by 2020, addressing sustainability in a precompetitive way. Recognising the fragmentation of standards in the cut-flower industry, FSI2020 aims to increase demands for sustainable flowers by providing transparency and comparability of standards. To help, FSI2020 has created a 'Basket of Standards' containing 14 sustainability standards that focus on different dimensions. We recommend taking a look and signing up for updates. See: https://fsi2020.com

Association Case Study: British Florist Association (BFA)



We have been working with the BFA and Chair Brian Wills-Pope for years now. Started in 1948, the BFA is the main trade body for UK florists, run by florists, for florists. We have conducted research with members, addressed events such as Vision and continue to work together on topics like floristry education, so national training includes sustainability as a core topic. We are also developing specialist eco-florist training materials for more advanced courses and florists.

How can you become more sustainable?

There are many things you can do today, some will even save you time and money. Communities of creative florists are developing more all the time, but here are some examples as a start. Consider your current practices, ask questions, then work to your own sustainability pledges and actions to benefit you, your community and the planet.

Sourcing flowers: How do they grow?

- Use at least partly seasonal, local
- If non-local or imported question the carbon footprint and certifications
- Build a network of suppliers who can provide sustainability information
- Consider growing some yourself!

Resource use: Do you need it?

- Refuse, reduce, re-use, recycle
- Review energy use, track it, reduce
- Use green providers and tariffs
- Inspire #noballoons, #nofloralfoam, re-using glass/vintage jugs or use biodegradable/recyclable material
- Reduce chemicals, find organics
- Collect rainwater, reuse when can

Waste management: Where can it go?

- Audit plastic use, seek alternatives
- Send packaging back to supplier and request it is reduced, improved
- Run a 'bring your own' or 'rent-a-vase' scheme to reduce packaging
- Track and minimise landfill, use a composter or lobby council to supply

Employees: Are they cared for?

- Use stable contracts that pay at least the minimum wage, working towards the Living Wage Foundation rate.
- Consider models that give workers more ownership, e.g. cooperatives
- Prioritise health and safety

Community: What can you offer?

- Donate spare/returned event flowers
- Run workshops on eco-floristry to teach skills for sustainable practice
- Visit groups to talk on sustainability, e.g. schools, church flower teams
- Link with local growers to help with above and general media interest
- Use socially certified flowers, such as Fairtrade, to help flower worker communities in developing countries and tell these stories to customers

Event Florist Case study: Lavender Green Flowers



As part of their sustainability work, this major UK events florist launched a Donations Initiative. MD Colin Gray explained that flowers returned from events are distributed to local charities, such as care homes and nursery schools. Giving clients this option not only reduces waste, but enables the client's event to benefit many.

A sustainable industry: What future?

- Share ideas and experiences with other florists, locally, online, at BFA
- Track progress to keep improving
- Follow our project to learn more…

High Street Florist Case Study: Wild and Wondrous



As an eco-florist, Nicola Hanney has a passion for sustainable flowers. She works to her own Green Pledge, ensuring environmental impacts drive decisions and practice. This is also part of her business brand. Clients get beautiful flowers but also the story of how they are locally grown or low carbon or supporting communities or assembled using low waste or low chemical methods. This can lessen bad impacts or improve good ones whilst helping customers feel good about their purchase.

Funding Our research has been supported by a variety of bodies, including:

- British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Grant - Promoting Ethical Flowers for Improving Working Conditions in Supply Chains
- WWF (South Africa) - Investigating Sustainability in South Africa's Wildflower Industry
- Coventry University Pump Prime Funding - Ethical Flowers: Promoting the Value of Certification Throughout the Supply Chain to Improve Working Conditions
- IMPAKT-Social Science - Advancing Understandings of Certification in the Cut-flower Industry
- MM Flowers, Fleurametz and Dümmen Orange – Workshop hosting
- Impact Acceleration Fund - Promoting Sustainable Horticulture

Further collaborations are planned to extend the project beyond 2020.

Interested in continuing the conversation?

If you would like to join our network of stakeholders, participate in the research, offer feedback on this guide or inspiration, or discuss collaborations and receive updates on our project, events and findings, please do get in touch – we welcome your views and do let us know who else you think we should be talking to.

See our project website for more resources, references to sources, links to articles and project updates at: www.sustainableflowers.coventry.domains

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This leaflet has been distributed in association with the British Florist Association. We thank the BFA and also our Steering Group for useful input.

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