House & Home

How green is your bouquet? The new eco-friendly mindset in floral design

The billion-dollar cut flower trade depends on imports and leaves a heavy carbon/chemical footprint, but things are slowly changing

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A few years back I went to a swanky Cotswold wedding. Nick Mason, Jon Snow, Fergie, Simon Le Bon and Gary Kemp wandered through a fairy woodland dotted with tablescapes of champagne. Heston Blumenthal made the cake, the climax of a mind-boggling wedding feast, and the enduring visual came from the jam jars full of fragile hedgerow flowers.

They were a foil to all the glamour and glitz and, like Shane Connolly's avenue of field maples and hornbeams for the marriage of Kate Middleton and Prince William in 2011, they signalled a new mindset in the world of floral design. A shift away from grand exotics flown in from all around the world.



For the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in April 2011, field maples and hornbeams were part of the seasonal British floral display in Westminster Abbey © Brooks Kraft LLC/Corbis via Getty Images

Both approaches put floral informality centre stage. And both were a wake-up call about the flower trade's environmentally harmful practices. After all, what's the point in scentless hothouse roses and vast hippeastrum when branches of hawthorne berries or scented UK-grown roses, honeysuckle and narcissi have so much lighter a carbon footprint?

Some leading flower people, such as Connolly, have led the way. "Climate change mitigation is my passion," says Connolly, who is warrant holder for flowers to the Prince of Wales. "The massed imported orchids and out-of-season roses you see on some Instagram weddings don't even read as flowers."



A packaging plant in Kenya, a big supplier of roses to Europe © Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images

All the same, out-of-season arrangements continue to loiter around hotel lobbies in New York, London and Hong Kong, and at some of the post-lockdown weddings that have been rammed into this year's calendar: heavy-headed roses, carnations, lilies and orchids girdled into displays to impress anyone who has the time to glance up from her Jaeger-LeCoultre watch.

The desire for unseasonal flowers supports a carbon-and-chemical-heavy global trade. In the UK, according to government statistics, the cut-flower and ornamental plant market was worth £1.3bn in 2018. Some 86 per cent of the UK's cut flowers are imported from overseas. In the US, the market is bigger. According to Justin Fox, a Bloomberg journalist, the US is "the world's biggest importer of cut flowers", with a market worth $1.6bn in 2019 — though it bears mentioning that the population of the US is five times that of the UK.



Sunshine and cheap labour make Colombia an important source of US cut flowers © AFP via Getty Images

The environmental issues around the cut-flower trade, particularly from Colombia and Kenya, were examined by the UK's department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2007 and many of those around water, soil and chemicals are still a concern. Fertilisers, fungicides and pesticides build up, causing short and long-term problems.

In Colombia, for instance, the flower industry used 200kg of pesticides for each hectare of flowers under cultivation, and Ecuadorean rose producers used six fungicides, four insecticides, three nematicides and several herbicides.

FT Weekend Festival



The festival is back and in person at Kenwood House (and online) on September 4 with our usual eclectic line-up of speakers and subjects. Speakers on the House & Home stage will include FT columnists and editors Luke Edward Hall, Robin Lane Fox and Jane Owen, among others. To book tickets, visit here

The report continues by focusing on irrigation, which depletes local water supplies and causes soil salinisation when surface water is used. Then there's the fossil-fuelled heating in greenhouses at high altitude; the non-compostable plastic from polytunnels, and cooling systems needed to keep the flowers fresh on their journey to the UK in lorries, aircraft and storage depots — to say nothing of the flights themselves or the packaging.

Colombia is one of the main sources of US cut flowers, its meteoric rise sometimes attributed to America's efforts to stem the drugs trade by cutting taxes on flowers. In the 1960s, well before the Bush administration brought in the Andean Trades Preference Act 1991, US entrepreneurs had been developing the trade in cut flowers from South America. Sunshine and cheap labour made countries such as Colombia and Ecuador ideal for roses, alstroemerias, carnations, hydrangeas and a host more beautiful blooms. Nearly half of the US's roses now come from Colombia.



Roses at a flower farm in Kenya © Patrick Meinhardt/AFP via Getty Images

Wastage is huge. Some 45 per cent of the flowers managed by the floral industry die before they are sold, according to Petal Republic, the New York-based organisation set up to celebrate "exceptional florists".

The UK and Europe face similarly worrying issues around flower imports. Dr David Bek, reader in sustainable economies at Coventry University in the UK Midlands, is co-leader of the Sustainable Cut-Flowers Project. "There are initiatives to reduce carbon footprints and water footprints. And also, to reduce chemical usage," he says. "The industry has to deal with these issues partly because of market pressure and partly because of the realities of climate change," he adds. "But there is a long way to go."

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In common with most trades, floristry, from the petrol station forecourt to the grandest designer, has to bow to consumer demand.

One high-society florist who asked not to be named told me that a major British institution refused her work because she would not use floral foam in her displays.

The institution wanted foam because it holds so much water that it avoids spills on their antique furniture. But it is made from carbon black, formaldehyde and phenolic foam, all of which are toxic. It also takes many years to break down. The Royal Horticultural Society has banned floral foam from its shows.

In July 2020, the Royal FloraHolland florists' conglomerate, sometimes known as the Wall Street of Flowers, published its "HortiFootprint Category Rules" (HFCR) for calculating an environmental impact of horticultural products for both ornamentals and fruit and vegetables. But until environmentally acceptable flower trade laws are agreed and policed globally, many of the bouquets of cut flowers we enjoy at weddings and festival days will continue to cost the planet dearly.

How to make sustainable displays

When it comes to making sustainable displays, homegrown garden flowers are the best bet. The RHS has advice on planting a garden for cutting and has produced many videos and books on the subject. The key is to identify the type of flower decorations you like, month by month, and work back from that, planting so that they are ready in time.



Floral designer Shane Connolly © Britt Willoughby Dyer

If growing your own isn't possible, though, hedgerow and countryside flowers may be an option. Laws about picking wild flowers vary across the world but in England it's fine to pick wild plants on public land so long as you don't uproot them — and so long as they aren't part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). You can find out if an area of the UK countryside is protected by going to the Defra website.

Better still, use attractive invasive plants or weeds such as bramble, valerian and cow parsley in the UK, or purple loosestrife and phragmites in the US, where they are already used for wedding displays.

Some floral designers, florists, farm shops and nurseries sell flowers that they have grown themselves (see panel). In the UK, Women's Institute markets are also good sources of homegrown flowers. Either way, while the environmental costs will be drastically lowered, the financial costs won't always be much different.

And do avoid floral foam. Stems can be kept in place by twigs, an appropriately shaped container, chicken wire or a Japanese kenzan, a heavy metal disc with strong, vertical metal pins.

Floral designers who strive for eco-friendliness

Saipua

Saipua (Finnish for soap), near Esperance in the wilds of New York, is planning a "limited number of weddings" next year using only material grown on their farm. They grow all their flowers and remove and compost them after the wedding.
saipua.com

Shane Connolly

Shane Connolly uses seasonal, ethically sourced flowers and, wherever possible, growing plants.
shaneconnolly.co.uk

Blooming Green Flowers



A pick-your-own bucket costs £75 and goes a long way. All grown using no-dig and organic methods near Maidstone in Kent.
bloominggreenflowers.co.uk

SSAW Collective



© SSAW Collective

In the words of co-founder Jessica Blume: “We never use imported flowers or foliage in our floral work. This goes against our ethos as a company and practice as florists. Our designs are strictly seasonal using only British-grown materials.
ssawcollective.com

Aesme

This sustainable practice includes organic growing methods, recyclable packaging, sourcing locally, composting green waste from events and avoiding non-biodegradable floral foam.

“We also use imported seasonal flowers grown in the Netherlands to supplement our limited supply during the very coldest months,” says co-founder Alexandra Nutting. Aesme’s “Dark” bunch costs from £43.
aesme.co.uk

Shane Connolly and Jane Owen will be discussing and arranging cut flowers at the FT Weekend Festival, Saturday September 4 at 11am

Jane Owen is an FT Weekend contributing editor. Follow her on Instagram: @janejaneowen.co.uk

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