

# Up the Supply Chain

Questions you've always wanted to ask

## Why Go Green?

WHEN THE SUN VALLEY GROUP GOT A "GREEN" seal of approval from VeriFlora last year, it meant adhering to sustainable agricultural practices, including reducing pesticide spraying, conserving water and developing a plan to eventually transition its 400 acres of cut flower production in northern and central California to organic production. Company owner Lane DeVries didn't realize it also meant he'd be spending twice as much to buy organic bulbs. "That's the biggest bottleneck in the equation here," he says. "And sourcing them and finding them, too."

Bulbs weren't the holdup for Colombian cut-flower grower Cultivos Miramonte during the two years it took to obtain the FlorVerde certification for one of its two farms, says Barbara Montes, vice president of business development. "The thing that took us the longest was having enough bathroom and shower facilities and hot lunches for 2,000 workers," she says.

### A Major Undertaking

Both VeriFlora, a U.S. program introduced in 2004 by Scientific Certification Systems, and FlorVerde, a 10-year-old Colombian program run by Asocolflores, certify based on a rigorous set of standards for how growers treat their workers and the environment. Both have worker requirements such as health insurance, continuing education and advancement for workers, medical facilities and hot lunches. On the environmental side, both require growers to adhere to strict standards about water conservation, pesticide use and monitoring, waste management, soil monitoring, and reforestation of property barriers. Unlike FlorVerde, VeriFlora has a quality component: date coding and temperature management requirements.

Growers who've been certified say it's a two-year process. "It's a major undertaking for farms," says Montes, of the FlorVerde certification.

About 70 farms have obtained FlorVerde certification, and dozens more are in the process of getting it, according to Asocolflores. VeriFlora certification has been obtained by four growers and, based on recent conversations with California growers, at least a dozen more plan to gain certification in the next few years.

### Staying One Step Ahead

So why do farms do it? Are their buyers asking whether the flowers are truly "green"? Not really, say a number of growers recently polled by Floral Management. What about consumers? Are they concerned about chemical use on flowers? It rarely comes up, say the retailers surveyed in SAF's Wednesday E-Brief. Not even among the ones who patronize San Francisco's Oak Hill Florist in San Francisco — a pioneer in sustainable flower growing in the Bay Area, with signage peppered throughout the store to ensure customers know the flowers are organically grown. "We tell people, but they don't seem to be concerned in the same way they

## Green Resources

VeriFlora: [www.scs-certified.com/csrfpurchasing/veriflora](http://www.scs-certified.com/csrfpurchasing/veriflora)

FlorVerde: [www.asocolflores.com](http://www.asocolflores.com)

USDA Organic Program:

[www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm)

— M. A. B.

are with food crops," says store manager Bob Burman.

For some growers, it's a matter of being one step ahead of the consumer. "They may not be asking now, but customers are going to be asking for it," says Dan Vordale of Ocean View Flowers in Lompoc, Calif., which just began the VeriFlora certification process.

DeVries agrees. "There is greater sensitivity among a certain group of our customers looking for" a socially and environmentally responsible grower, he says.

### Seeking a Seal of Approval

Montes says the driving force for Cultivos Miramonte and, she suspects, some other growers getting "green" certifications, goes beyond the "greening" of America to an even broader demand for quality and accountability. "The consumer is hungry for standards," she says. While they might not seek organic flowers, per se, "they're looking for guarantees, some proof that they're dealing with a quality supplier," she says.

DeVries agrees. "It's like the Good Housekeeping seal of approval," he says.

If Hank Bowen, president and CEO of Delaware Valley Floral Group, and Tom Leckman, president of Sierra Flower Trading, have their way, more growers will eventually see it as a "must-have" seal of approval. The companies recently started encouraging their grower suppliers to seek VeriFlora certification. A July 13 letter to Sierra customers states that the two companies are "committed to buying and marketing VeriFlora-certified flowers." Leckman says he hopes VeriFlora will eventually become a "universal" standard for growers and handlers.

Bowen says having more certified farms ultimately will make product quality more consistent. "Having industry standards makes a lot of sense," he says.

The push for VeriFlora certification — and promoting the label to consumers — will ultimately increase floral consumption, says Leckman, by giving consumers buds that "last the week (consumers) expect them to."

"Many growers I have talked with have said that it is difficult or impossible to make the switch to organic," says OrganicBouquet.com's founder and CEO Gerald Prolman. "I agreed that it would be difficult but was certain that it is possible, as I saw this same story unfold in the early 1990s with the impressive growth of the organic food business." 🌱

— Mary Ann Barton and Kate Penn

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