

questioning authority

Amy Stewart says that flowers are bigger business than you might think.



NATURE WRITER AMY STEWART STARTED by pondering how something so pure and natural as a flower could have begun its life as a manufactured commodity, and ended up investigating the \$40 billion business of flowers. For *Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill), her third book—following explorations of gardening and earthworms—she visited farms in Northern California and Ecuador, a security checkpoint in Miami, and a giant Holland flower auction. Stewart, 37, spoke from her home in Eureka, Calif. —MATTHEW BUDMAN

Were you at all aware how much flowers are big business?

Absolutely not! I was astonished to find out that three-quarters of our flowers come from Latin America. The notion of harvesting a flower in Ecuador and driving it in a truck to the airport in Quito and putting it on a plane and flying it to Miami to have it be inspected by the Department of Homeland Security and putting it on another plane—it's just mind-boggling. All that for a *flower*, something that has such a short life anyway.

I don't think people think at all about where flowers come from. We just take it for granted that they're there and assume that they probably came from a farm nearby. In some ways, we need to believe that they came from a farm—we're buying flowers because they seem like something that comes from nature.

And flowers don't carry brands, right?

Dole Food Co. has tried. Dole has a huge cut-flower division; they got into the business because they are so vertically integrated. They control every step of the supply chain, all the way to the supermarket, and they wanted to apply that to flowers, to brand the Dole bouquet; they wanted people to be able to walk into a supermarket anywhere in the country and look for a Dole bouquet. Why hasn't that worked? One reason is that we don't want our flowers to be the same everywhere. They're not Big

Macs. If I walk into Safeway and buy a mixed bouquet that has three stems of asters and two stems of carnations and a spray of baby's breath and four ferns, I don't want to accept that every Safeway in the country has that exact bouquet on that exact same day.

But aren't people across the country calling, say, 1-800-FLOWERS and ordering the exact same bouquets? Don't they want and expect them to turn out the same every time?

Well, if I'm going to call a florist and give them my credit-card number and spend fifty dollars for flowers to go to some friends, I want to know what I'm sending them. But of course, flowers are seasonal and unpredictable, and you don't really know, day by day, what a florist might have in his shop.

When you began this project, did you think of flowers as an "industry"?

Not at all. I happen to live in a community where the largest cut-flower grower in the country, Sun Valley, has one of its four farms, so I took a tour of the farm during an open house. I had an image of a field of poppies and a red barn, and I walked into the farm and realized that it's a factory, and that flowers are merchandise and freight. None of that had occurred to me before. Flowers are so sentimental, and we use them to say things that we can't put into words, and yet they really are a manu-

factured product. It was such an interesting contradiction. That's what led me into this.

It seems like an enviable project for a gardener—or anyone who loves flowers. You write, "Visiting a flower farm is kind of like visiting a chocolate factory."

It was great to get to go to Holland and really see the birth of the flower industry, and to go to Ecuador and see what kind of environment most of our flowers come from. And it was a delight just being around flowers day after day. People in the industry grow immune to it: They can walk past a cart holding thousands and thousands of flowers and not swoon. But I never really got over that. It's *stunning* to walk into a greenhouse where everything's in bloom all at once. These people look at it in terms of dollars and cents: how many bulbs per crate, how many crates per row, how many rows per greenhouse, how many greenhouses per acre. All I see are the flowers.

Was there ever a point in your travels at which you didn't want to look at another flower?

No. I appreciate flowers more now because I know where they come from, and I have a more sophisticated taste in flowers now. I've become a better consumer—and probably a more demanding one. I have an expectation that I should be able to buy flowers that were grown

under better conditions. I'm in favor of *better* flowers: longer-lasting and more beautiful and more unique and more interesting—and more socially and environmentally responsible.

Speaking of growing conditions, you discuss the dangerous chemicals that workers in Latin America use, and the efforts of journalists and activists to publicize the issue. Why have American consumers paid so little attention?

Well, while there has been very good reporting done by *The New York Times* and *National Geographic* and *Mother Jones*, it hasn't reached every consumer of flowers in the country. And if the choice between organic and non-organic is not there, it's asking rather a lot of the consumer to go into Safeway and walk up to the 18-year-old at the cash register and demand organic flowers. I can walk into Safeway and decide whether I want organic apples or non-organic apples, and I can vote with my dollars. Flowers have never been labeled in that way.

Why not?

The problem is the distribution process, the way the flowers move to market. Once they leave the grower, they might be mixed into a bouquet with flowers that come from other growers or even other countries, so by the time they get to the consumer, they've lost their identity. An apple, by contrast, comes with a little sticker that says this is an organic Fuji apple that was grown in New Zealand. With flowers, you can only put that information on the sleeve that holds the bouquet, and what's in that sleeve could have come from a lot of different places. The flower industry has started to come up with certification programs, much like the Fairtrade Foundation in the United Kingdom. It doesn't say the flowers are "organic," but it says there's some level of oversight. Sometimes they don't require much more than complying with the law in the country, which is not a huge step forward, but at least there's someone monitoring. There are now

Consumers don't know what a "better" flower might be.

enough certified growers that you could manage to put together some bouquets that have some kind of eco-label on them. That's all that consumers want—some assurance that someone is thinking about this stuff.

Do consumers really care whether their flowers are organic?

In Ecuador, I got asked this question over and over. Growers would say to me, "Do Americans care about this? Will Americans want my organic roses? They're doing well in Germany and Switzerland—could I ship these roses to the United States?" I was amazed at how many growers asked *me* questions about *their* business. But the truth is that I don't think there's a lot of awareness about organic flowers yet. We haven't shifted that way of thinking over to flowers.

In terms of the sustainability movement, the green movement, that train has already left the station. When people can buy organic products at Wal-Mart, the market is ready. It's *beyond* ready. Put a sticker on those flowers that says they're organic or socially responsible or certified. People are ready to buy. They just have to be given a choice, and that will make them more aware.

A lot of industry practices and problems seem common to many businesses: production, transportation, marketing. Did you think about flowers compared to other industries?

In some ways, the best thing to compare the flower industry to is other sectors of agriculture. There are interesting similarities and differences. Think about

the Dutch flower auction, where half of the world's cut flower supply—half of it!—gets put on a plane, lands in Amsterdam, gets put on a truck, goes to the auction, gets put on a cart, is wheeled in front of bidders, is bid on, gets put back on the truck and then back on a plane, is sent to a warehouse, goes to a florist, and then it ends up in your house. My mind is still reeling over this. Why do the buyers need to see the actual flowers? For produce, we have other ways of assuring that the product is going to be good—we don't have to fly it to *Holland*. There's no apple auction; there's no tomato auction.

What about the retail side?

That's where I was really able to see the parallels between florists and other kinds of traditional, mainstream specialty retailers, like bookstores or any other retailer facing increasing competition from mass-market suppliers. If people can walk into Wal-Mart and buy flowers for a fraction of what they'd pay at a florist, why should they keep going to the florist? Florists complain that there's no way for customers to differentiate their products. And it's true: If you want red roses, all you can ask for is . . . red roses. So people think there must not be any difference, which is why consumers aren't willing to pay more for better flowers. They don't know what a "better" flower might be. Consumers are used to being able to walk into a grocery store and buy a dozen roses for \$9.99, so why should they pay \$50 for a dozen roses that basically look the same? They may last longer, but there's no easy way to tell.

So florists are focusing on service. You're not going to go to Wal-Mart to buy flowers for your grandmother's funeral. There are still things that only a florist can do. Only a florist can make up an arrangement of flowers to your specifications and put them in a car and drive them to your loved one's home and knock on the door and hand them the flowers. And that is not an experience that we get very often as consumers. 🌻