

Background

Thorny issues

On Valentine's day, you may give or be given a bunch of red roses. But have you ever considered how they got to you? It is a remarkable process, for most of the roses in high street florists or supermarkets in the UK have travelled hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. The world's number one producer of roses for Britain is currently Kenya with around a quarter of the overall UK flower market. Israel and Colombia each have about 16%.

Kenya is able to exploit a comparative advantage for flower growing. Most of the flower farms are in the Rift Valley that supplies the water. It has an ideal climate and lots of cheap labour. In 2008 it had €300 million worth of flower exports, just under 10% of the country's export income. It directly employs around ten thousand people and feeds ten times that number. Even though the climate is ideal, most flowers are produced in greenhouses to protect them from the occasional hailstorm or from becoming wet before they are harvested. Wet flowers rot quickly, so they need to be picked while the blooms are dry. Having them indoors also facilitates spraying and pest control. Picking them at the right time is crucial and flower growers have to know how to manipulate flowering time.

Once the flowers are picked it is a race against time. They are boxed without water and cooled to keep them as fresh as possible. They are taken from the farms to the hub at Nairobi. Some big Kenyan flower producers prefer to sell directly to their main markets. Roses are sent direct to Miami to be distributed to other sites in the US. The Kenyan operation tries to add value by preparing the roses in cellophane and barcoding them so that they can go straight to the retail outlet. They can be almost anywhere in the US within 48 hours of being cut.

However, the majority of flowers go to Alasmeer market, the biggest flower market in the world, just outside Amsterdam. It has one million square metres of warehouse space and up to twenty million flowers a day are sold there. Six thousand producers send their flowers to Amsterdam from all over the world. Wholesalers bid for them: prices start high and then are lowered – the classic Dutch auction. Thousands of transactions take place in a short space of time. Wholesalers buy them then re-export them to other markets across the globe. They are rushed to the UK by plane or in refrigerated trucks and are delivered to florists.

We may all ask ourselves what this means for the environment and the carbon footprint that is involved in transporting flowers such large distances. Surprisingly, research carried out by Cranfield University discovered that roses grown by the Dutch had a carbon footprint six times higher than those produced in Kenya. This is because vast amounts of energy are used to provide the heat and light that roses need. This is free and plentiful in Kenya, but has to be provided by other means in Holland.

But there is one caveat to this apparent success story. Despite the industry being a money earner for Kenya and providing much-needed employment for the population, conditions on the farms are far from rosy. Wages are extremely low, as little as 10 pence an hour, and the mainly female workforce has little job security. For this reason, the industry has been targeted by the Fairtrade Foundation in a bid to improve workers' terms and conditions. Now, many outlets stock Fairtrade flowers from Kenya, but there is a long way to go to improve workers' conditions throughout the Kenyan flower industry.

Exercises

1 Work with a partner and answer these questions.

- 1 How often do you buy or receive cut flowers as a gift? What are the occasions?
- 2 What are the most popular flowers in your country? What is the etiquette about giving them?
- 3 As far as you know, where do the flowers you buy or are given come from?

2 Read an article from a British newspaper about Valentine's Day roses and create a flow chart from when they are picked to when they reach the customer in the UK.

3 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- 1 What makes Kenya an ideal place to grow roses?
- 2 How important is the flower export industry to Kenya?
- 3 Why are roses grown in greenhouses?
- 4 Where are the two main destinations for the roses?
- 5 What is special about the Alasmeer flower market, and the way the flowers are sold?
- 6 What is surprising about the carbon footprints of Dutch roses and Kenyan roses?
- 7 What is the negative side of the rose-growing business in Kenya?
- 8 How is this being addressed?

4 Match 1–8 to a–h to make collocations from the text.

- | | |
|---------------|-------------|
| 1 retail | a value |
| 2 cheap | b space |
| 3 job | c advantage |
| 4 carbon | d earner |
| 5 comparative | e footprint |
| 6 add | f security |
| 7 warehouse | g outlet |
| 8 money | h labour |

5 Using the text to help you, decide what the collocations in 4 mean.

6 Work with a partner. What do you think the three following expressions mean?

- 1 a thorny issue
- 2 It is a race against time.
- 3 Conditions are far from rosy.

7 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

8 Work in pairs or groups and discuss these questions.

- 1 After reading the article, would you think twice about buying roses from Kenya?
- 2 How important is it that people in producing countries receive more for their labour? Who do you think makes the profits?
- 3 What would happen if people boycotted Kenyan flowers?
- 4 Buying cut flowers adds to mankind's carbon footprint. Do you think we should offer carbon neutral gifts?