



- Twelve years ago, there were 100 carnation growers in the United States; now there are 24.
- While America's rose production has declined by almost three quarters in the past 12 years, it has soared in places such as Colombia, Ecuador and Kenya.
- We buy most of our flowers at the grocery store, but we spend the most money when we order from independent florists struggling to maintain their retail foothold.

All of this reminds us that not even a flower is simple. Delving into the broader world of horticulture leaves one astonished by the complexity of how, say, a petunia arrives at the garden center. This humble flower is backed by a global labyrinth of breeders, seed companies, growers, marketers, sales representatives and shippers. The machinations of floriculture are made even more poignant by the fact that the moment a flower is cut, it begins to die. So flowers are for the moment, which raises their value as a currency of human sentiment. Creating them is a far less poetic affair.

Flowers are not just picked from the wild; each lily or amaryllis is hybridized for particular, commercially viable traits by specialists who devote their lives to doing so. *Flower Confidential* shows us the original breeder of the ubiquitous Stargazer lily, an eccentric and sad figure who failed to cash in on the flower's success. But Stewart, who writes regularly for *Organic Gardening* magazine and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, also reports on the sophisticated efforts to raise tulips, gerberas and lilies by one of California's remaining cut-flower producers, Sun Valley Floral Farms. It is run by a grower named Lane DeVries, who left his native Netherlands to build the enterprise into America's largest producer of cut flowers. The Dutch influence in the industry is pervasive and legendary. Stewart shows us the daily flower auction at Aalsmeer, a vast concrete complex near Amsterdam that is the major global market for cut flowers and potted plants -- a rather cold and soulless place for so beautiful a commodity.

The Dutch auctions are still vital to floriculture, but the shift in actual growing -- especially in the western hemisphere -- is to the Andes, a region of optimum cultivation conditions and cheap labor. Stewart draws a picture of Ecuador's flower industry that is alternately disturbing and encouraging. Human rights groups worry about nursery workers who receive just \$150 a month and endure difficult conditions, including exposure to chemicals banned in the United States. Stewart also cites problems with sexual harassment and child labor. But as with some foodstuffs, retailers and consumers can now choose "green label" flowers whose growers pledge to look after their workers and the environment.

Stewart's journey takes us down many such paths, all connected by her own curiosity and highly readable prose. The greatest value of *Flower Confidential*, however, is that it was written at all. We know so little of the ways simple daily items are brought to us that such a book helps us grasp our modern world. Who knows? *Flower Confidential* may compel us to return to something purer, more local. It may send us in search of our own version of Teresa Sabankaya's flower kiosk. ·

*Adrian Higgins is the garden editor of The Post's Home section.*

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