



Over two days of optional farm tours, convention participants could visit eight flower farms, all within driving distance of Santa Barbara, where this year's convention was held. The second day of tours ended with lunch in a tent erected right in the middle of flower fields, blooming with sunflowers and stock, at Ocean View Flowers in Lompoc, California.

At Rose Story Farm, Danielle Hahn grows garden roses that are picked to order for special-event clients. Visitors on the first day of tours were treated to lunch at the farm, with fragrant rose bouquets on the tables. When you smell a rose, Danielle suggests, take at least five seconds to fully appreciate its perfume.



At Holland America, farm visitors could watch as workers in hoop houses harvested freesia, then bundled, recut, and sleeved the flowers on the spot and quickly placed the bunches in buckets for transfer to the processing area. Buckets of fully open freesia were also on display.

CALIFORNIA GROWN

Why buy flowers from California? This summer's California Floral Convention offered plenty of good reasons.

Text and photography by Bruce Wright

IF YOU TALK FOR LONG to Lane Devries, current chair of the California Cut Flower Commission (CCFC), you're likely to hear this statistic: when Americans are asked where the flowers they buy come from, 85% say they don't know—but 55% say that if they did know, they would prefer to buy American.

Not surprisingly, Lane and others see a marketing opportunity there for California-grown flowers, which currently make up

about 75% of all the flowers grown in the United States. It's not even that we need to buy fewer flowers from abroad, Lane argues. With flower buying overall in the U.S. lagging behind general economic growth since 1989, and with the U.S. ranking lower than many developed countries in per-capita consumption, there is plenty of room for growth.

California growers think Americans will feel good about buying more flowers if they

know the story behind those flowers. "If they could have the experience we're having right now—the experience of meeting growers and walking in the fields—they would definitely be encouraged to buy more flowers," said Kasey Cronquist, CEO of the California Cut Flower Commission, speaking at the convention. "We have to learn to tell that story."

Flower-farm tours and the opportunity to meet and talk with California growers are at the heart of what makes the California Floral Convention special. The convention, formerly known as Fun 'N Sun Weekend, is hosted every other year by the California Association of Flower Growers and Shippers, also known as NORCAL. This year, programming for the event was planned in cooperation with the California Cut Flower Commission, a California state agency funded by assessments from growers. Both organizations have a common mission: promoting California-grown flowers.

A TALE TO TELL What are the most important elements of the California story?

- For reasons of both history and ge-

ography, California is growing some of the most intriguing and diverse flowers on the market. When production of carnations and roses fled to South America in the '70s and '80s, California growers sought alternative crops, and found them: everything from premium lilies and garden roses to proteas, berries, grasses, dahlias, gerberas, and a lot of things you may never have heard of—things your customers likely can't find at the grocery store (see pages 18-19 for just a few examples).

• Many California growers have chosen to support the traditional supply chain, selling mainly to wholesale florists rather than to mass-market buyers. Among other reasons, "We prefer to have more, smaller customers, rather than just four or five big ones," says Ever-Bloom's Ed van Wingerden. "Then if one of them stops buying from you it's not such a big hit." When California flowers do end up in mass-market bouquets, it may be in bouquets that are labeled with the "California Grown" logo—a marketing strategy that has been quite successful for some retailers.

- When it comes to environmental and

social responsibility, regulations in the state of California set the bar very high—and many California growers go beyond those standards. Water recycling, energy conservation, and pest control via integrated pest management (IPM), with only minimal use of pesticides, are all common practice on California flower farms. A number are certified by the sustainability certification program Veriflora®. The California Cut Flower Commission is now developing its own comprehensive and rigorous sustainability program—one that will be tailored to the circumstances and best practices of California flower growers.

FARM FRESH Although the California Floral Convention caters to wholesale florist buyers, it's really at the retail level that the California story can be conveyed to consumers.

Advocates for California flowers draw inspiration from the growing strength of the "buy local" and farm-to-table movements. They point to the phenomenal success of farmers' markets around the country. While farmers' markets might seem more like

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competition for traditional retail florists, they also provide an indication of the interest consumers have in making a connection with the people who grow the food they eat—and maybe also, the flowers they put on the table.

Farm-to-table—also called the “slow food” movement—has inspired a book called *Slow Flowers* by garden writer Debra Prinzing, who was a featured speaker and panelist at the convention. (Debra’s website of the same name is due to launch this fall.) Consumer research shows that interest in buying local is across all demographics, said Debra, pointing to abundant evidence of the movement’s strength. Surveys say 65% of American consumers feel that supporting local businesses is an important issue—more important than global warming or sustainability.

Another featured panelist was Christina Stembel of Farmgirl Flowers in San Francisco, an online retailer that delivers only bouquets of locally grown flowers. Customers don’t get to choose what flowers are in the bouquet (the only choice is small, medium, or large)—but Christina has found that plenty of customers (80% in one survey) are happy to leave that up to their florist. As a bonus, doing it this way lets Farmgirl Flowers keep flower waste to an astonishingly low 3%.

Farmgirl’s model wouldn’t work for most retail florists around the country—but it could easily be adapted for a weekly special. “Using local is a conscious decision, and our profit margins are not what they would be if we used imports,” says Christina—but she is cultivating a market that is ripe for development.

“With stories like these,” says Lane, “the potential is there to grow the market by promoting American-grown flowers. I see great opportunity for flowers in this country—but it’s going to take all of us to get there.” 🌱



Dozens of varieties were on display at Sun Valley Floral Farms, at its Oxnard facility—not only lilies, as seen here on the near end of the table, but sunflowers, asters, iris, matricaria, lisianthus, gerberas, and more.



At Myriad Flowers, Erik van Wingerden (owner with his dad, Harry) is one of the last California rose growers. Myriad grows 70% roses—mostly in greenhouses; the pink spray rose ‘Diadem’ is an exception that does better outdoors.



Ocean View Flowers is one of few flower farms where packing is done entirely in refrigerated rooms. Cuts go into a bucket in the field and are sleeved immediately, then conditioned in a cool (but not refrigerated) receiving area, to prevent moisture from collecting inside the sleeve. Finally, they are moved into a large cooler for packing. Ocean View is credited with introducing *bupleurum* (seen here) to the market.



While most anthuriums on the market are field grown and come from Hawaii, California grower Ever-Bloom—best known as a gerbera farm—also grows anthuriums in greenhouses. They are a little more expensive, but of reliably consistent quality.

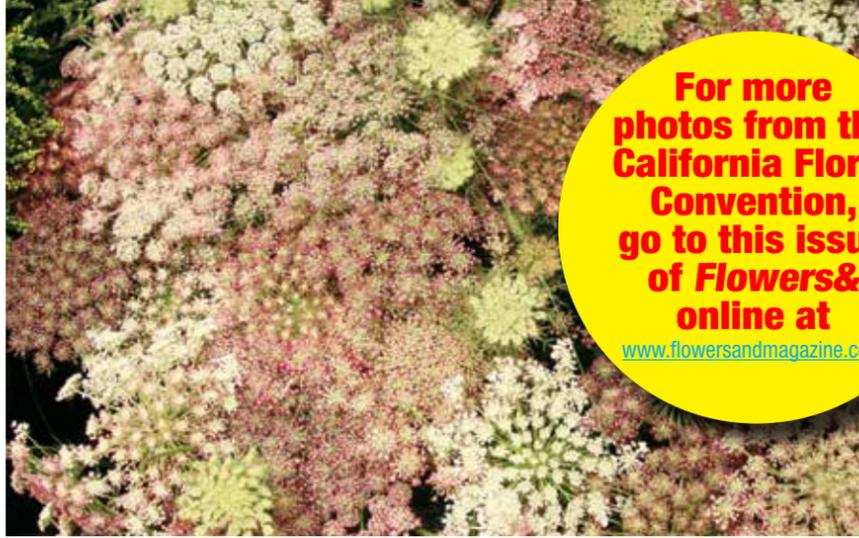


A team of seven AIFD designers kept the lobby of the convention hotel overflowing with inventive designs to showcase California’s fresh flowers.

CALIFORNIA GROWN

THE CALIFORNIA FLOWER FAIR

Looking for excitement in your fresh-flower offerings? With its diverse product mix, California can be credited with developing the market for nontraditional flowers. These are just a few highlights from this summer's California Floral Convention.



For more photos from the California Floral Convention, go to this issue of *Flowers & online at* www.flowersandmagazine.com

Queen Anne's lace, in white and pink, from B&H Flowers, www.bandhflowers.com



Blushing bride proteas from the California Protea Association, www.californiaprotea.org



White English lavender, somewhat less fragrant than purple lavender, available May through July from California Flower Shippers, www.californiaflowershippersinc.com



Orlaya from Dramm & Echter, www.drammechter.com



Grevillea from California Protea Association, www.californiaprotea.org



Long-lasting (five to seven days) stemmed gardenias from Kitayama Brothers, www.kitayamabrothers.com



Flannel flowers, still rare on the market, from the California Protea Association, www.californiaprotea.org



Stephanotis on the vine, from California Flower Shippers, www.californiaflowershippersinc.com



A protea wreath fashioned by Mel Resendiz of Resendiz Brothers Protea Growers (www.resendizbrothers.com), on display with the California Protea Association, www.californiaprotea.org



Dahlias from Skyline Flower Growers & Shippers, www.skylineflowers.com



Pistachio-colored queen of hearts, a forged product available in late June and July from California Flower Shippers, representing small boutique growers in the Pescadero area, www.californiaflowershippersinc.com



Immature striped figs—they would normally be harvested a little later in the season—from the California Protea Association, www.californiaprotea.org



'Francois Rabelais', a ravishing red rose from California Pajarosa Floral, www.pajarosa.com



Matsumoto asters from Joseph & Sons in Santa Paula; email joe@josephnsons.com