

Where would we be without California flowers? Not only would the product mix available to retail florists look quite different, but the logistics that run behind the scenes, and the marketing face and the spirit of the industry would all have a very different flavor as well.

California supplies 80% of the cut flowers grown in the USA. It's true that that's a smaller portion of all the flowers bought and sold here than it was back in the day before imports came to dominate the market. But there's no question that California growers play a leadership role.

Much as some independent, professional flower shops are succeeding in today's marketplace by establishing a

niche with distinctive products, and a brand with exceptional quality, so too, California growers are thriving in the global cut-flower economy, with quality and variety that can't be beat. It's not easy. It takes ingenuity, innovation and plenty of hard work. But the results are impressive.

FROM THERE TO HERE All that was evident at this summer's CalFlowers convention, celebrating the organization's 75th anniversary. The history of California flower farming actually goes back even further, to the 1870s, when the completion of a transcontinental railway made it possible for California-grown flowers to reach urban centers in the East and Midwest.

Immigrants—mostly Japanese and

Italian—founded the industry in California, creating the first flower farms. In 1941, their descendants formed the California Association of Flower Growers & Shippers (then called NorCal, now Cal-

A prime example of California flower farmers' resilience and innovation, Kendall Farms occupies 500 acres of hilly terrain where water is pumped from wells all over the property to high reservoirs, then used to water crops like myrtle, waxflower, eucalyptus, leucadendron, proteas, kangaroo paws, and many more. In 2007, a fire destroyed 80% of the farm—a disaster that was seen as an opportunity to rebuild. Today, 2,000 solar panels produce all the electric power used on the farm, including what's needed for coolers, an automated processing area, pumps and propagation houses.

www.kendall-farms.com

Stronger Together

What California flower growers can teach the industry.

Text and photography by Bruce Wright





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Flowers for short), joining forces to coordinate and improve transportation to their markets back East. An awareness and concern for getting flowers efficiently to market, sometimes over long distances, is therefore built into the bones of the California industry.

Today the members of CalFlowers include out-of-state growers and others involved in flower shipping and the entire supply chain, in California and in 45 states across the nation. That history and membership encourage a broad perspective and a spirit of collaboration. In recent years CalFlowers has led a coalition of industry stakeholders including Asocolflores, representing Colombian growers and exporters, in creating promotions designed to boost flower sales across the board.

"When we look at cut-flower sales in the U.S., we see a strong correlation between imports and California production—meaning that they rise together and fall together," says Michael LoBue,

chief executive officer at CalFlowers. "That says to me, we should be collaborating to grow the whole pie. At CalFlowers, our aspirational theme is, 'More Americans enjoying more flowers more often.' In promoting that, we also promote what's special about California."

And there is plenty that is special. "In cut flowers, the California brand is the first to be recognized on a national level," according to industry observer Joaquin de la Torre, managing partner at Ball SB, who spoke at the convention. Joaquin believes the success of the brand is owing to consistent quality and an appealing product selection: "Selling products by place of origin by itself doesn't really work," he opined. "People don't buy French wines or real Parmesan cheese solely because those products come from France or from Parma. You buy because you believe if it comes from there, you will get a certain quality, something that is different and not easy to copy."

NEW KIDS Flower buyers looking for novel, intriguing and attention-getting blooms look to California for crops like these, exhibited at this summer's CalFlowers convention, clockwise from upper left: stem-dyed sunflowers from Tutuli Flower Farms; marigolds from Twins Flower Growers; dill from Ocean View Flowers; and bee balm (in the genus *Monarda*), from Camflor.

www.camflor.com,
www.oceanviewflowers.com,
www.tutuli.com,
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ON THE CUTTING EDGE California cut-flower production has evolved to make the most of the state's strengths. In South America, climate, topography and history have all been conducive to larger-scale production. In California, even though some farms are large and sophisticated in their operations, they more often retain the flexibility and versatility of family-owned boutique businesses. They are encouraged in that direction by California's microclimates, seasonality and diverse geography.

Some California growers, especially in the north and central parts of the state, have turned to high-end specialty flowers, often greenhouse-grown, like garden roses and bulb flowers such as lilies, tulips, and iris. Others grow field crops such as stock and delphinium, proteas and kangaroo paws, waxflower and specialty foliages from eucalyptus to flowing dark-red agonis.

"The California look" is right in tune with the

cut-flower trends we're seeing nationally and even worldwide, noted author and educator René van Rems AIFD—for a reason. "It's a wild look, a non-commodity look," as he describes it. "When the mass market first started doing flowers, it was all mass flowers, with maybe some fillers. Now, line flowers are coming back. Bouquets are getting looser, with spikey line flowers coming out of the tops."

An example of such a flower is delphinium—a crop that California growers are producing more of, thanks not only to bouquet trends but to new varieties that resist shattering. A new spray variety of delphinium still offers line value but spreads wider, with more flowers at the top of the stem. Likewise, limonium is becoming a fashion flower, according to Ball Seed's Lourdes Reyes; the latest varieties lack the musty odor that once made this flower unpopular with some florists. Campanula, foxglove, spray roses, and long-

GARDEN DELIGHTS California roses and hydrangeas put in a spectacular appearance at the convention's Flower Fair, including Crazy Eye garden roses from Eufhoria and mopheads in a range of colors (at lower left above) from Sun Valley. Directly above, California Pajarosa Floral showed double varieties of hydrangea—one bright pink, one that turns from pink to green.

www.eufhoria.com,

www.tsvg.com,

www.pajarosa.com



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stemmed lisianthus with buds poking out past the flowers are all contributors to “the look.”

Cut-flower trends watchers have noted the return of interest in foliage—with a special emphasis on the grassy and feathery, often gray-green, exotic foliage that hail originally from Australia and South Africa and that grow beautifully in southern California: eucalyptus of all kinds, leptos, grevillea, honey bracelet, leucadendron, melaleuca, myrtle and more. Pincushions and other flowers in the protea family are taking their place in long-lasting bouquets, with new varieties that blend more easily with greenhouse flowers.

UP IN SMOKE? Last fall, California voters passed Proposition 64, which makes production and recreational consumption of cannabis legal in the state starting in January 2018. The new law has created a storm of speculation regarding its impact on the state’s agriculture industry, including its flower farms. The worry was that cut-flower growers would be forced into competition with cannabis producers, not only for greenhouses but for labor, land, and water—all scarce resources in the state.

NATURE AND NURTURE In the Carlsbad area, where CalFlowers held its convention, Dramm & Echter grows lilies, gerberas, and spray roses in greenhouses managed with scientific precision and strict environmental controls. Flower farmers like Bob Echter work closely with breeders, growing test crops of gerberas (top right) to determine how well they will fare in the greenhouse. At lower left above, Bob holds a bit of rockwool, the inert medium used for growing gerberas hydroponically, which allows precise control of water and nutrients. At each watering, about half the water is drained and processed using a technique called reverse osmosis so that it can be reused. The yellow flag in the greenhouse tracks plant pests, which are kept at bay using biological controls (good bugs that eat the bad ones): “We haven’t used a commercial pesticide for two or three years now,” says Bob. Labels in the lily greenhouses record the variety, the bulb size (which determines how many blooms will appear on each stem), and a lot number that allows the grower to trace the origin of lily bulbs back to the supplier, in case any problems should arise. The Cobras in the photo directly above were allowed to bloom in the greenhouse for the benefit of visitors; normally, of course, lilies are harvested with buds just showing color. Harvesters must be well trained in judging when the buds are ready. The Firebolt lily that is just opening at top left may have jumped the gun!

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Soon after the proposition passed, the CalFlowers executive team commissioned a study from experts on California agriculture

at the University of California at Davis. How bad could it get? The results of the study were reported at the CalFlowers convention, followed by a panel discussion.



THE GREAT OUTDOORS California flower farms generally fall into one of two categories, focused either on greenhouse growing or on field crops. At Mellano & Company, some outdoor crops are grown in hoop houses, which offer a degree of protection and control—like the one in the top photo above, where a string of lights overhead can be used to manipulate “day length” and induce flowering year-round. Watering and other environmentally sensitive controls can be even more challenging for field-grown flowers than for crops grown in a greenhouse, but they can also be astonishingly sophisticated. In the lower photo above, Mellano’s Jess Williams explains how underground sensors on the farm monitor soil moisture in real time and transmit data to a mainframe computer so the growers can know and adjust to irrigation needs. www.mellano.com

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The good news is that for all the brouhaha, changes to California's cannabis industry are not likely to take place overnight, and in any case are unlikely to derail cut-flower production or send prices skyrocketing. Although it has been operating

heretofore underground, cannabis production in California is already a mature and stable industry. Interstate trade remains illegal; legal cannabis will be available within the state but may not much expand the market. Taxed and regulated, it will be considerably more expensive than cannabis sold through the current black-market channels—which are therefore unlikely to evaporate.

In the end, too, it's important to remember that most flower growers are in it for more than just the money. In California and elsewhere, it's not the first time they have been faced with pressure from competition for land, water and labor. Some flower farmers are looking at converting just a portion of their greenhouse space to cannabis—as a way of financing renovations that will improve the profitability and productivity of their cut-flower operations.

A passion for flowers is something that California growers clearly share with their customers. The in-state grower members of CalFlowers number 118. As a group, they have a long history. And yet, the industry has also been invigorated with an infusion of young blood: half of these members started in business within the past 25 years—well after cut-flower imports came onto the scene. It all suggests a bright future—and not just for California's flower farms, but for their customers and industry partners across the nation and around the world. 🌸



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THE CALIFORNIA LOOK

California's coastal micro-climates nurture a wide diversity of crops that come together in what is now becoming known as "the California look." Those crops range from high-end, greenhouse-grown specialties like garden roses, gerberas, dahlias, lilies and fancy tulips to field-grown fillers and foliage with a wild meadow look. The full range was on display in a foyer of the hotel where CalFlowers, the California Association of Flower Growers & Shippers, held its convention in August. www.cafgs.org





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