



Bellissima!

A look at specialty flowers and foliage from Italy.

Text and photography by Bruce Wright

Does it surprise you to know that the largest grower of cut flowers and foliages in Europe, after the Netherlands, is—Italy?

To be sure, everyone knows Italian ruscus, with its strong but flexible stems and shapely, glossy, dark green leaves. But many people don't know that only 50 years ago, Italy was considered the world capital for carnation production. It was in Italy that the world's best breeders developed carnation hybrids with strong stems and calyxes that wouldn't split.

Today "fancy" carnations are still in the mix, but with competition from Africa and South America for commodity flowers like carnations, Italian growers have turned to specialty flowers like ranunculus, anemones, and poppies—premium flowers that require less labor and a more specialized expertise.

Italy can also make a claim to be the birthplace of international commerce in cut flowers. It was 150 years ago, in 1860, when the first cut flowers were sent to Paris from Nice—which was then part of Italy, at the western edge of the flower-growing region around San Remo, on Italy's northwestern coast. The introduction of the railway made possible the export of flowers from Italy, with its Mediterranean climate, to markets as distant as Berlin and St. Petersburg. Today the region of Liguria, which includes San Remo, still produces 80% of all Italian cut flowers and foliage destined for export.

ABOVE: White ginestra is stem-dyed at the farm by growers who harvest the flowers, then let the cut stems drink the dye. Here bunches of dyed ginestra have been dropped off at a collection point nestled among the hills and maintained by a cooperative of about 150 growers. Other flowers and foliages at this collection point, awaiting transport to the auction at San Remo, include spiraea, ruscus, eucalyptus, pittosporum, and (right) *Viburnum tinus*, with iridescent blue berries, here held by Pat Dahlson of Mayesh Wholesale Florist in Los Angeles.



Intensely fragrant ginestra perfumes the steep hillsides in the coastal area around San Remo. Much of Italian flower production is centered in this region, which is blessed with Mediterranean microclimates similar to those that make California such a fertile and diverse flower-growing state. The hilly landscape is unsuitable for crops like wheat or corn and resists consolidation by agribusiness, with the result that Italian flower farms remain, for the most part, tiny. Of the 4,000 farms in the region, most are smaller than a hectare (2.5 acres); larger farms have perhaps two or three hectares. None sells individually to U.S. buyers. Instead they bring their product to market, where it is aggregated by wholesalers, who also grade and package it.



LEFT: The San Remo market has a long tradition, but a relatively new facility, only three years old—a big, handsome trading hall served by a warehouse complex and linked to international airports at Nice and Milan. The market's auction room is patterned on the Dutch model: the "clock" starts at a high price and rapidly descends. Buyers watch the clock and press a button to place a bid. Press too early, and you pay too high a price; wait too long, and a competitor may snap up those premium ranunculus that you needed to procure for your own customers. **RIGHT:** Fancy carnations still take pride of place among the many locally grown flowers for sale at the San Remo market.



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Available from October through March, Italian ranunculus is relatively expensive, but of exceptionally high quality. "Up to ten years ago, ranunculus was regarded as a flower only for mixed bouquets," says Nico (Domenico) La Marca (*above*), who specializes in ranunculus at his flower farm, La Marca Flowers (www.lamarcaflowers.com). "Now a ranunculus is a premium flower, more like a rose. But the market is still adapting to this shift." In keeping with the Italian landscape (steep slopes, small lots), La Marca ranunculus are not mass-produced; they could be considered "artisanal flowers." The farm has 120,000 bulbs; production is fairly diversified, split among 18 or 19 different varieties. The presence of the auction at San Remo has helped Nico find a market for his high-end, specialty blooms. Many of them end up in the USA.

Nico plants all new bulbs every year and buys them from the world-famous breeder Biancheri, close by. He grows them in greenhouses in raised beds, which make it easy to keep the plants healthy without the use of chemical treatments in the soil. Flowers cut in the morning are put in water for two hours, recut, then put in only a couple fingers of water for shipping. They leave the area in the late afternoon and reach markets in Aalsmeer or Paris the next morning, 12 or 16 hours later. Some traders send La Marca ranunculus directly from Milan to Miami. "These traders insist on perfect flowers," says Nico.

The Riviera line of ranunculus (*above*), in vibrant colors with green centers, is one product grown at La Marca and sourced from the famous breeder Biancheri Creations. Another is the PonPon ranunculus (*below*), named for its rounded shape and distinguished also by its ruffled petals. Just introduced to the market, the PonPon ranunculus flowers early (it can be harvested in early October) on a robust stem and offers a vase life up to three weeks. A percentage of proceeds from the sale of the bulbs goes to benefit a children's hospital well known in Italy, Giannina Gaslini Hospital in Genoa.



At La Marca, just-harvested ranunculus are bunched and sleeved, then placed in buckets.



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"Ruscus is not a Mediterranean plant originally, but for some reason it grows better here than anywhere else," says Silvia Guadalupi, who with her husband Marco Damele grows both ruscus and plumosus on a three-hectare farm near San Remo. In its native habitat in the Caucasus, ruscus is shaded by a forest canopy. Italian growers simulate those conditions by cultivating ruscus under artificial shade, which insures that the plants will grow tall and the leaves will develop their famous dark, glossy green.

Ruscus must be harvested by hand, with special care, selecting only the older shoots and leaving the youngest ones behind. In the spring, some shoots will be too soft. In the fall, berries are more abundant and don't naturally fall off, so they must be manually trimmed from the stems. For the first year or two, ruscus plants have rounded leaves (*above*); only after three years, when all the leaves become pointy, are the shoots ready for harvest. Then the rhizomes can last 20, even 30 years, producing perhaps five or six harvestable new stems every year.

Although ruscus is vulnerable to a variety of pests—red spider, thrips, and weevils among them—Silvia and Marco avoid using pesticides. Their farm, Eredi Damele, has been certified by the international green initiative, Fair Flowers Fair Plants (FFP)—an especially remarkable achievement for a farm of this size.

What we now call "Italian ruscus" isn't the only foliage plant that thrives in Liguria. Yvonne Fossati (*above*) grows 40 varieties of foliage, including plenty of ruscus, but also aspidistra (*below*), pittosporum (*far right and below right*), eucalyptus, flax, and laurel. In the photo above, she admires a branch of curly hazelnut (seen stripped of its leaves, *near right*), which takes 15 years to mature. Yvonne's grandmother started the farm in 1942. Foliage is a good crop for a family farm, she explains, because there is flexibility in the harvest time, which means a small family can manage it.



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Providing a showcase for Italian floriculture is the Euroflora show, which has taken place once every five years since 1966. This year the show attracted 430,000 visitors, mostly members of the general public, over ten days. They come for the elaborate and gorgeous floral displays spread over the extensive fairgrounds—displays that feature, naturally, among other products, the premium cut flowers of the San Remo region, including ranunculus and poppies. The region also produces phalaenopsis and tillandsia.

The next edition of Euroflora will take place, not in 2016, but in 2015, to coordinate with the World Expo in Milan (though Euroflora will be, as always, in the fairgrounds of Genoa). Unfortunately for Americans in the floral trade who might want to see the show, it is scheduled for early May, right around Mother's Day. A smaller selection of Italian-grown flowers and foliage, however, might be as close as your wholesaler's cooler. 🌸

