

Bouquets (and second thoughts)



IRENE VIRAG

As Valentine's Day approaches, so does a new book every flower lover should read. It's got its share of romance, but essentially, the subject is serious business. A \$40 billion-a-year worldwide business known as the cut-flower trade.

The book, which hits stores this week, is "Flower Confidential" (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, \$23.95) by Amy Stewart, a transplanted Texan who grows Shasta daisies, daffodils, salvias and sweet peas on the Northern California coast, and whose last book, "The Earth Moved," brought the amazing subterranean world of earthworms into the light of day. She also raises chickens because, as she puts it, "They're the perfect pet for someone who's home all day. I go out and look around and ask, 'Anyone lay an egg yet?' It's a good distraction."

I haven't thought about keeping chickens because my husband is enough of a distraction, but Amy is one of my favorite garden writers and not just because we're in sync about our craft.

"I feel the best garden writing is about people," she told me during a phone interview. "My challenge was to find the right people, places and flowers that would bring the story to life. I wanted to write about the breeding, growing and selling of flowers and trace the arc of the journey to its end at the flower shop."

Which is exactly what she did, traveling across the country and to Latin America and Holland. What she found out is that when we say it with flowers, money talks. Especially next week, when industry estimates are that sweethearts near and far will celebrate Valentine's Day by buying 180 million roses, not to mention other blooms. With a dozen stems costing about \$70, the cash registers will be coming up roses, too.

Think about it — I surely did. You walk into a florist shop and buy a bouquet. You pick up a bunch of flowers in the supermarket along with the milk and eggs. You call an 800 number or go online and click a button and — voila — a bouquet is on its way to mom for Mother's Day.

But few of us have the faintest idea where these perfect flowers come from or what it takes to get them to their destinations. Amy provides a graphic picture — taking us behind the scenes of what the



PHOTO BY AMY STEWART

Ecuadorian workers package flowers for the American market.

book's subtitle sums up as "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers."

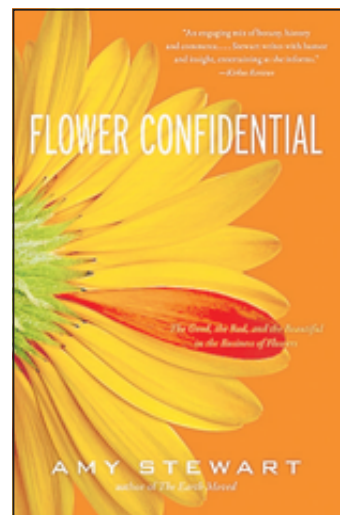
She visits high-tech greenhouses, where computer-controlled shades open and close to manage sunlight as clouds come and go outside. She travels to the Dutch Flower Auction in Aalsmeer, the hub of the global cut-flower industry, where every day 19 million flowers pass through a complex bigger than Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom and Epcot Center combined. And to flower farms in Ecuador, where the average wage is about \$150 a month and production room employees suffer health problems ranging from headaches to miscarriages.

She watches workers, who wear respirators that are worse than useless if improperly fitted, dip a rose called Limbo into barrels of fungicide. "The guys in charge of the dip were drenched in the stuff," she writes. "It spilled on



Amy Stewart, who wrote "Flower Confidential," traveled to three continents to research her behind-the-scenes book.

the floor. . . . If those rich, velvety petals had to be dipped in a chemical to make them ready for market, I didn't want them." Later, she follows the gorgeous green rose to Miami International Airport, where 12



million to 15 million flower stems arrive each day during the two weeks leading up to Valentine's Day.

She does her damndest to be fair — pointing out that without the cut-flower indus-

try, Latin American workers would be forced into even lower-paying jobs — and visiting organic growers and sellers like the online innovator Organic Bouquet and Nevado Ecuador, which bills itself as "Roses With a Conscience," offering knockouts like Amy's new favorite, the tricolor pink, cream and green Esperance.

"I tried to be even-handed," she told me. "I want people to read the book and make up their own minds. We have to be thoughtful about the flowers we buy."

She believes — and I hope she's right — that a "green revolution" is under way, that the certification of cut flowers will come into its own this year. A "green label" called VeriFlora is already in the works. "People are accustomed to buying organic apples and Fair Trade coffee and free-range eggs," she told me. "There's no reason why we shouldn't expect certified Fair Trade flowers, too. For VeriFlora certification, you have to be 100 percent organic or have a transition plan. And there's a long list of banned chemicals."

I know I'm going to be a lot pickier now when I buy cut flowers. I'll think about the Ecuadorian workers making pennies an hour who have to dip thousands of roses in fungicide every day. I'll search for organic blooms — and I'll keep an eye out for the VeriFlora label.

And, like Amy, I'll keep being passionate about flowers. Or, as she writes in the book's introduction, "I've always had a generalized, smutty sort of lust for flowers." I know the feeling.

Along the way, she gives lessons in botany and big business, history and horticulture. She enlightens and entertains; she poses questions and offers opinions. And she does it with style.

Yet, she doesn't ignore the sentimental side of it all. You'll be touched by the bittersweet story of an idiosyncratic grower "in search of beauty and poetry" who created Star Gazer, the world's most popular lily, and the intriguing tale of a researcher caught up in the quest to develop a blue rose.

I think everyone who gives a bouquet of roses or any other cut flowers for Valentine's Day should include a copy of Amy's book.

Helping your blossoms live long and prosper

Author Amy Stewart offers these tips for getting the most from your bouquets:

- Buy flowers that have been refrigerated.
- Ask for a "vase life guarantee." Amy says most florists will replace flowers that don't last at least 5 to 7 days in a vase.
- Plunge roses and other sturdy flowers — blooms, stems and all — into cold water. One grower claims that submerging roses in the bathtub

for three hours makes them last two days longer in the vase.

- Clean the vase and fill it with water before adding flowers. Remove lower leaves with scissors or a knife so no foliage is under water. Re-cut the stems and place immediately in water.
- Add commercial flower food to keep flowers blooming longer. Amy says a pinch of sugar and a few drops of

bleach will also work.

- Keep flowers in a cool spot out of direct sunlight and away from heating or air-conditioning vents.
- Change the water every few days, especially if it gets cloudy, and re-cut the stems.
- Remove flowers from mixed bouquets as they wilt. They may give off ethylene, which could cause other flowers to fade early.

— IRENE VIRAG

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