



A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue hoodie, yellow rubber apron, and orange gloves, is carefully handling a bouquet of green roses in a large industrial flower processing facility. The facility is filled with numerous other roses in various colors (red, pink, orange) hanging from metal racks. The background shows the structure of the facility with metal beams and hanging lights.

FROM ECUADOR WITH LOVE

A FLOWER'S JOURNEY, FROM FARM TO VASE

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL // PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIN LUBIN



Surrounded by row upon row of rose bushes with flowers blooming in hues ranging from deep red to gray lavender to snow-white feels a bit like standing in the middle of a fairy tale. Except the air is stifling, and there's work to be done. All around me, farmworkers snip stems with expert efficiency. They place the roses in carts they drag behind themselves while moving throughout the greenhouse. I try to help, but my unpracticed eyes are slow to find the roses ready for harvest, my hands not as quick with the scissors; I slow the process down.

It's early January in Cotopaxi, a rural, volcanic region in Ecuador, and the employees of La Victoria Farm are busy harvesting roses; 70,000 of them a day. By the end of the month, as production increases in preparation for Valentine's Day, they'll harvest as many as 200,000 per day. Within a few days of being snipped, those flowers will be in stores worldwide, including at the Danbury and Westport Whole Foods Markets.

A boutique of flowers standing pretty in a vase is such a simple, little thing that sparks lots of joy. It only makes sense that a flower's journey from the farm to vase be full of love.

Years ago, the United States had a vibrant floral growing industry, with 80 percent of flowers sold coming from local growers, but today, that number is only 20 percent. The vast majority of the flowers come from Latin America.

"Because of the customers, I have benefits, thank them." It's a phrase I hear over and over again from workers like Mayra Toaponta, who's worked at La Victoria for 7 years, Loide Pruna for 18, Eva Chango for 19, Felix Rendon for 11, and so many more. Maybe I am standing in the middle of a fairy tale.

La Victoria Farm is one of only a handful of Fair Trade Certified flower farms in Ecuador. Chances are you've heard of "fair trade" and have a vague idea of what it means. A silver lining of the pandemic may be that it's

forced many of us to think not only about how our products are made but how the people who make them are treated. Fair trade describes commerce in which producing, selling, and buying products supports and improves workers' quality of life and the environment.

"We want to grow the company, but we want to help our people grow too," said Diego Espinosa, General Manager and Partner of the farm.

At La Victoria, that means that farmworkers have access to a dental clinic, medical clinic, and laundry facility. A laundry facility may sound like a small thing, but for the women I spoke to, it's the difference between a day off they can spend with their families versus a day spent hauling their laundry to a local river to wash. A process that can take most of the day.

Through a farmworker run committee, the farmworkers at La Victoria and other Fair Trade Certified farms also have the power to decide what to do with some of the money the farm receives for the flowers, what's known as the fair trade premium. At La Victoria, they've decided to buy land and build homes a short ways away from the farm. At nearby Agrogana Farm, the farmworkers built a childcare center and after school program for the farmworkers' children to attend.

"I haven't gone outside of Ecuador for roses for two or three years," says florist Jessica Bowen of Ridgefield's Flower Girl Florist, a full-service floral studio. "I know they're paying their workers well, providing them with doctors, and a lot more," she said of the farms in Ecuador, where she sources her roses.

What should you look for when purchasing roses? According to Bowen, look for a large bloom that feels firm and boasts lots of petals. When in doubt, ask your local florist. They should be able to guide you to different varieties and talk to you about their sourcing.

After leaving the greenhouse at La Victoria, we went to the production facility where my counting skills were tested. Workers trimmed, grouped and packaged flowers, smiling, chattering and telling me again to thank the customers. So much joy packed into each box. ■

A KALEIDOSCOPE of hues span the rows and rows of rose bushes in greenhouses in Cotopaxi, Ecuador, where 70,000 roses are harvested each day. Some will end up at the Danbury and Westport Whole Foods Markets.

