

What price fresh flowers?

Flowers have long been symbols of love and caring. People send them to express sympathy, to apologise, or just wish someone well. But today, floriculture — the growing and selling of flowers — is very big business, worth £2.2 billion a year in the UK alone. The majority of the cut-flowers sold there are imported, these days mostly from countries such as Colombia and Kenya. The Netherlands is the traditional centre of flower production in Europe, and remains a major supplier of flowers. In recent years, however, as labour and production costs have soared, attention there has shifted from flower production to flower trading. Meanwhile, the Kenyan cut-flower industry has grown rapidly, and now provides a vital income for around two million people. It is the country's largest agricultural foreign exchange earner after tea, producing £165 million annually.

For the environmentally conscious, it might seem wasteful that a commodity such as flowers should travel halfway around the world before arriving at a supermarket or florist shop. Just as some environmentalists say that it's better to buy fruit and vegetables grown locally, some also advocate the buying of locally-grown flowers. Thanks to globalisation, however, the UK cut-flower industry now supplies just ten per cent of the country's needs. Twenty years ago it was more like half. What's more, it is suggested that reversing this trend would actually have serious environmental consequences.

Research published in 2006 by Cranfield University in the UK showed that the production of Kenyan flowers, including delivery by air freight and truck, resulted in a carbon footprint nearly six times smaller than that caused by the production of Dutch flowers. Kenya has optimal growing conditions and the warm African sun provides heat and light, whereas growers in the Netherlands and other developed countries require significant inputs of gas and electricity to grow flowers year-round in artificial climate-controlled environments.

But there are other environmental factors to consider. A vast range of pesticides, fertilisers and fumigants are used in producing cut flowers. Lake Naivasha, the centre of Kenya's flower industry, is the ideal place to grow roses, thanks to its high altitude and abundant sunlight and water. However, environmental damage has resulted from the development that has followed in the wake of floriculture. Lake Naivasha itself has shrunk to half its original size, with water levels dropping by three metres, fish catches falling and the native hippopotamus feeling the effects of pollution.

Meanwhile, transporting flowers over long distances poses its own set of challenges. Roses, for example, have to be shipped by air rather than sea because they require constant refrigeration and

wilt quickly. Transporting other types of flowers by sea can also be tricky compared to air freight. Demand is difficult to predict, which means entire shipping containers can seldom be filled with a single species, but mixing flowers is often inadvisable because some varieties emit gases that spoil others. One strategy is to opt for heartier breeds such as carnations and lilies which are easier to ship and require less refrigeration than roses.

TASKTYPE 1 Identifying Information (True/False/Not Given)

Questions 1-8 Do the following statements agree with the information given in the Reading Passage? Next to each question, 1-8, write

TRUE	if the statement agrees with the information
FALSE	if the statement contradicts the information
NOT GIVEN	if there is no information on this

1. In recent years, cut flowers have become more expensive to grow in the Netherlands.
2. More people are employed in the cut-flower industry in Kenya than in Europe.
3. Flowers represent Kenya's most valuable agricultural export.
4. The UK has seen a marked decline in the proportion of locally-grown cut flowers on sale.
5. The Cranfield study concentrated on the environmental effects of transporting cut flowers.
6. The Lake Naivasha region produces a range of cut flowers including roses.
7. Supplies of some local food items have been affected by the impact of floriculture around Lake Naivasha.
8. Transporting cut flowers by sea is generally more successful than using other means of transport.