

# THE TRUE COST OF FLOWERS

IS THE BEAUTY OF THOSE FLOWERS ON YOUR DRESSER SURFACE DEEP? **CHARLIE NEARY** MEETS A BRITISH FLOWER FARMER WHO WANTS US TO THINK SUSTAINABLY WHEN BUYING BLOOMS

There's nothing that brings as much joy as a beautiful fresh bunch of flowers. Whether you're buying them yourself, are lucky enough to be given a bunch, or you subscribe to a letterbox delivery, the joy and beauty of a vase full is something that goes unmatched. But that beauty might all be surface.

For many of us, the flowers in our home are picked up as part of the weekly shop or from the big-name local florist. Year-round, there's a plentiful supply of bouquets; roses in February and an abundance of tulips in March – all uniform and perfectly matched for under £10. And let's not forget all that plastic wrapping.

But Roz Chandler is quietly leading a revolution from her flower farm in Milton Keynes – part of a new army of British flower growers who are determined to make a difference in how we consume and enjoy flowers.

Field Gate Flowers started life with just three long beds which were inspired by a one-day 'Grow your Own' course. Today, Roz's house sits surrounded by a five-acre flower farm,

where every bloom is grown naturally and in season.

We caught up with Roz as she was out planting dahlias. "Smell these," she says to me, inviting a small bunch of stocks to my nose. "Beautiful, right?" Indeed, the scent of the freshly picked stocks is delightful, but they're flowers – that's meant to be a thing.

"Of course, they're meant to smell," Roz says. "But when was the last time you picked up that scent around the flower displays in your local supermarket?"

"You see, one of the most significant differences between British-grown flowers and the mass-produced wholesale flowers is the scent. They don't have the smell you'd expect because they aren't allowed to grow naturally.

"And we've all just got used to that," she adds. "We've forgotten that flowers are supposed to smell."

She's right, of course, but it's something I hadn't thought of before.

## Local and sustainable

Roz is an industry-renowned expert, but more than that, she's deeply

passionate about British flowers and wants everyone to know why buying British is best for you and the planet.

The cut-flower market here in the UK is worth more than £2 billion a year, and with more than 7,000 florists occupying a space in the UK's flower industry, it probably won't surprise you to hear that more than 90 per cent of the UK's flowers are imported from abroad.

For the longest time, I, like many, thought that these flowers were all imported from Holland – which is indeed what we're led to believe. In part, that is true – they do come 'from Holland', but only in so much as they are distributed from Holland via wholesalers.

"You see, many of the flowers that we see sat, nestled in layers of unrecyclable plastic have arrived here from such far-flung destinations as Columbia, Ethiopia and Kenya," Roz explains.

"Across the world, flowers are grown year-round to meet demand. Those straight-stemmed roses you had for Valentine's Day? Yes, they're beautiful, but they're not natural."

Unlike every other product you see in the supermarket, flowers don't need to be marked with a country of origin, so as consumers, we don't know what we're buying, so we don't question it.

"This needs to change," Roz tells me. "We all know that buying strawberries in January isn't natural, but at least before we make that purchase, we can see that they've been grown and imported from South Africa, so we can understand the impact of our purchase on the planet and decide as to whether we are happy with it – with flowers we have no such option."

## The human cost

With all that in mind, it probably won't surprise you that this \$55 billion industry is complicit in poor practice regarding the treatment of employees and the local population.

Globally, there are reports of questionable practices in the industry. Workers are low paid, working in an unregulated industry where health issues caused by exposure to chemicals are commonplace.



*"There's not a pesticide or a chemical in sight. Bees and other critters happily buzz around, doing their bit for the planet unhindered."*

The communities that surround the flower farms suffer, too. They often find themselves deprived of water supplies, which are diverted to meet the needs of the flower growers and the big businesses that operate them.

And what about the environmental impact? There's the carbon footprint of flying flowers thousands of miles – that's huge, but there's also the issue of the effect on the land and biodiversity in the areas in which the flowers are grown.

To meet demand, increase production and give the flowers a chance to survive their flight and onward journey, the mass use of chemicals comes as standard, ensuring bugs and critters don't stand a chance. These chemicals impact the land and the waterways of the locality, contaminating water supplies regularly and affecting people and broader wildlife populations.

And we haven't even really discussed the word 'plastic' yet... all that cellophane that we buy the flowers in is just the tip of the melting iceberg when it comes to the amounts of plastic used by the industry.

### Buying British

But it doesn't have to be all doom and gloom – changing up the flowers you have in your home is a people and planet-friendly switch you can take today, and you'll be making a difference straight away.

"Buying British flowers is the way forward," says Roz. She's right, and just a look around Roz's beautiful farm tells you why. There's not a pesticide or a chemical in sight. Bees and other critters happily buzz around, doing their bit for the planet unhindered. Everything that's growing is meant to be there.



"The flowers look and smell beautiful, but they also last longer as they aren't undergoing days of travelling," she continues.

"Buying your flowers locally ensures you're buying sustainably – it's farm to the vase."

### Do it yourself

"Growing your own British flowers takes time and patience, but it's worth it," Roz tells us. "Of course, some flowers are easier to grow than others, but anyone can grow their own – and I encourage everyone to do it! It's my dream for everyone to have their own cutting patch full of flowers."

Through the pandemic and over the last few seasons, Roz has run a cutting patch course, which has brought forward a new cohort of flower growers who have taken the hobby on for a multitude of reasons.

From a hedge-fund manager who grows her own in pots on the roof garden of her London apartment block to de-stress and get some 'me time' to the pharma exec who had a breakdown and took up flower farming as a new career, one of Roz's most incredible discoveries is the immense wellbeing power of flowers.

"Some of the people I've spoken to have had their lives transformed," Roz says. "They've lost themselves in growing while they mourn, recover or de-stress from their busy lives, allowing the fresh air and the physical work to takeover until the joy of their flowers takes its place."

"Watching lives change with flowers is just wonderful – and of course, the big bonus is that there are more British, seasonal flowers in vases and fewer mass-produced bouquets being bought, and I love that!"

Follow Roz at @fieldgateflowers. ●

### 5 OF THE EASIEST BRITISH FLOWERS TO GROW

Start off with these five easy direct-sow annuals that go straight in the ground.

- Nigella
- Clary sage
- Scabious
- Ammi Majus
- Amaranthus

You can sow all these straight into the soil – no germination needed.

Think of herbs too, such as mint, rosemary and sage – great in cooking but also in arrangements.

Add foliage and perennials like roses and dahlias and you have the start of a perfect cutting patch.



**THE AUTHOR**  
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