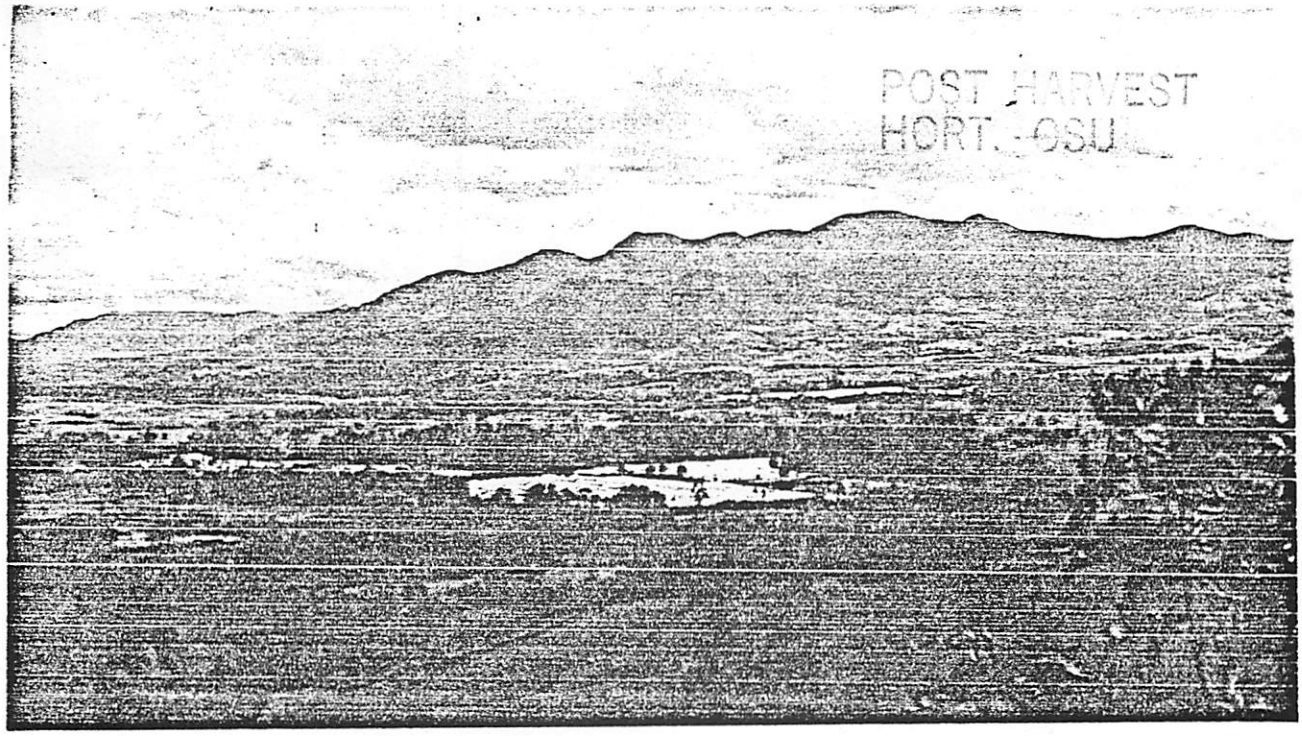
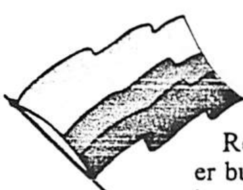


Several flower farms in a valley in the Andes near Medellin.

BADER '83

How the Colombians do it



text and photos by Barbara Bader

Retailers and wholesalers in the flower business must look constantly for the best sources of supply. The definition of "best" varies, depending on who's doing the defining. But everybody looks for good quality, competitive prices, dependability in terms of timeliness and quantity, simple distribution and good relationships. In this industry, knowing who you're dealing with is particularly important for two reasons: the perishability and delicacy of the product, and the fact that so many deals are transacted verbally and without guarantees of payment.

Although US growers may not want to hear about it, the Colombian cut flower industry has an enormous effect on each segment of the US industry. Just as retailers know their wholesalers, and wholesalers know their US growers and their brokers, so it is wise to know something more about the people and the farms that grow the thousands of Columbia flowers sold by members of this industry every day. Whether or not you say, "I prefer Colombian products," depends on personal taste and the origin of your supply. Each farm in Colombia is different and has different successes, problems and personalities.

Jorge Uribe of the Colombian export growers organization, ASOCOLFLORES, says there are about 180 farms growing flowers for export on about 800 hectares (1,976 acres). Although these figures are pretty steady at this time, Uribe says that cut flowers were his country's second largest legal export—right behind coffee—in 1982. "This is not due to increases in flower exports as much as a decline in bananas and sugar, which had been greater."

Seventy percent of all flowers exported from Colombia are shipped to the US, Uribe adds. Most of the rest goes to European markets.

According to the 1982 USDA Ornamental Crops Report, Colombia sent 458,190,000 carnations, 23,651,000 mums, 48,813,000 bunches of pompons, 72,867,000 roses and 2,181,000 minicarnations to the US market last year. Although the US rose market seems to be holding its own, US growers of the other crops mentioned have had trouble (for a variety of reasons) competing over the past 10 years. And it's during the past 10 years or so that the Colombian growers have been progressing in their techniques and marketing ability—and focusing on the US market.

I accompanied a group of 10 US retailers and wholesalers on a visit to five flower farms in Colombia, which was preceded by a whirlwind tour of their Miami counterparts. It was an opportunity to see for ourselves the development and journey of those flowers from the point of import backwards to the beginning of the process at the source—the grower. My comrades each had his or her own reasons for taking the trip. Some were interested in doing business directly with growers, and all wanted to know first-hand how and where their flowers are grown and who is growing them.

My fellow travelers were Carmen Cosentino, organizer of the trip and a wholesaler and retailer from Auburn NY; Phyllis Clasing, longtime retailer and Cosentino's mother; Charles and Otto Schroeder, a father-and-son retail team from Green Bay WI; Bill Waszkiewicz, a newlywed retailer from Utica NY; Chuck Davis, wholesaler and retailer from Dayton OH; Lou Lessure, retailer from Cincinnati OH; Charlie Barnard, retailer from Clavrack NY; Hugh Pemberton, a retailer from Vestavia Hills AL, and Bill Kasting, wholesaler from Buffalo NY.

Of the five growers we visited, three are in the area of Bogota and two are in a mountain valley at a slightly lower altitude near Medellin. Four of the farms are large and one was relatively small. Of the five farms, two are part of the Sunburst organization. (Mike Felsher, president of Sunburst, was a valuable resource to Carmen Cosentino, who planned the trip.)

The connections between the Colombian farms and the Miami importers can be confusing. In the US, wholesalers and retailers tend to refer to Colombian product by the names of the importers: Riverdale, US Floral, Sunburst, etc. It's easy to forget that all the flowers from a particular importer don't necessarily originate from the same farm or even region in Colombia. Following is a list of the importers and farms we visited.

- Miami: Continental
  Bogota: Flores de los Andes

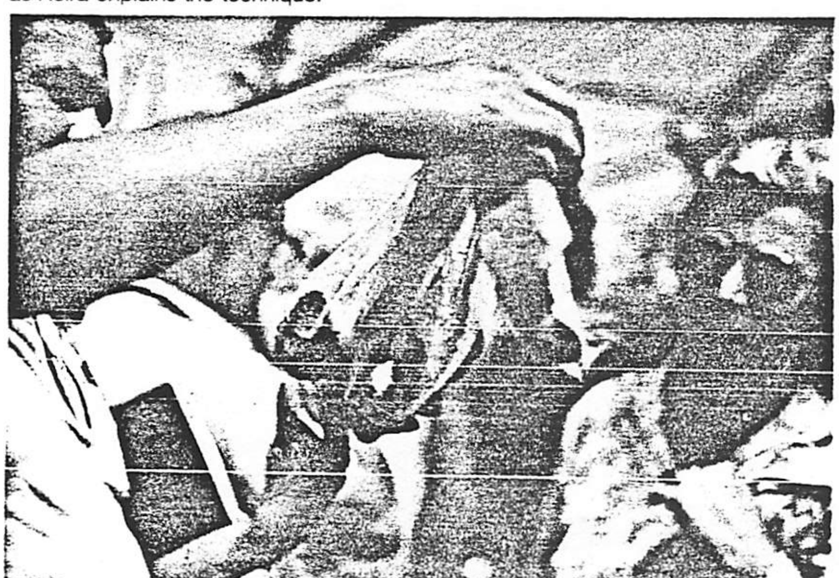
- Miami: Riverdale
  Bogota: Flores del Rio

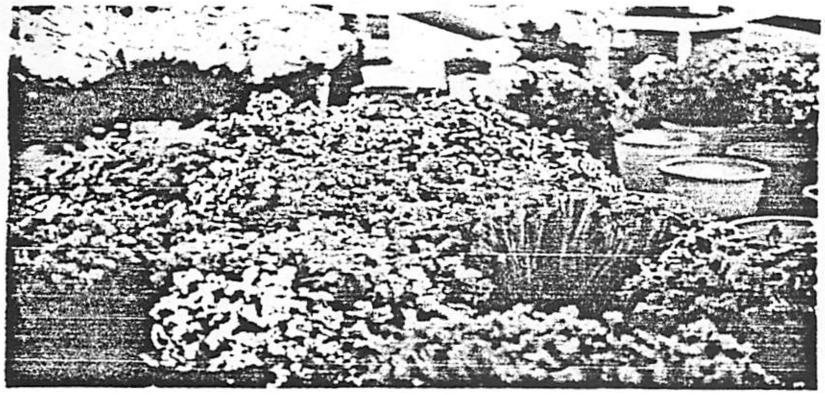
- Miami: Sunburst
  Bogota: Floramerica
  Medellin: Florcaribe

- Miami: Florida Evergreen (no visit)
  Medellin: Floral Ltda.

Although a particular importer may bring in product from a number of Colombian growers, the three Miami

Right: Leafminer damage was evident on mums at Floral in Medellin. Below: Luis Neira shows leafminers captured by a large vacuum cleaner. Phyllis Clasing watches as Neira explains the technique.



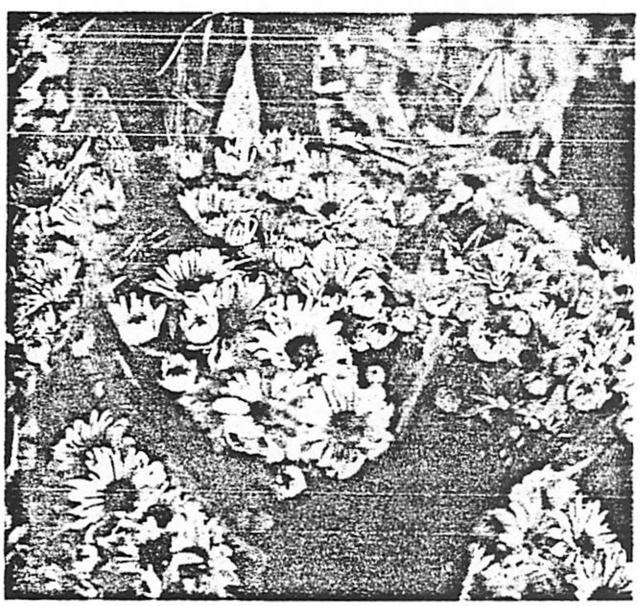


Right: Cut gerberas, packed and hanging in water, await the finishing touches prior to shipping from Florcaribe in Medellin. Still in the experimental stage, some gerberas are shipped to the US, but many are directed to domestic markets. **Above:** Florcaribe statice awaits packing.

firms we visited try very hard to monitor the flowers for strict quality control.

The growers we visited in Colombia, for the most part, seem very quality conscious. Two of the farms, Flores de los Andes and Floramerica, have their own tissue culture labs used mainly to keep clean, top-notch mother blocks. All the farms work toward maintaining sanitary facilities that are pest- and disease-free.

Four of the five seem to be on top of the situation. The area around the greenhouses is clear of troublesome weeds and is attractively landscaped and maintained. All machinery is clean and painted, shallow pools of water or disinfectant must be forded before entering mother blocks and some ingenious methods of insect control are in use.



Above: Bunches of Medellin mums grown at Floral, wait in buckets before packing. Floral is a small farm specializing in mums.

Floral, near Medellin, is a smaller firm specializing in mums. It was the only farm we visited where disorganization was admitted and leafminers were abundant. However, our guide there, Luis Neira, the firm's new technical manager (on the job for just a short while after being hired away from a neighboring grower) seems to have plans for reorganizing and cleaning up the insect problem. Though leafminers were evident everywhere, Floral does attempt to control them. Workers roam the greenhouses with large vacuums attached to hoses resembling elephant trunks—vacuuming leafminers from the plants. Florcaribe, also in the Medellin area, uses this ingenious—but laborious—method to help control the pest. Florcaribe, however, seems to control the problem systematically and well.

Most of the US retailers agreed that, although the Floral product had miner problems, the colors were more intense than what they had seen in Bogota.

Continental

Barry Gottlieb, Continental's sales manager, has an enthusiasm for the business that is contagious. His background as a professor of childhood education may not have prepared him for a life in the flower industry, but he cares about each detail and orchestrates the movement of flowers and people with the care of a teacher developing his class. His conversation is dotted with indications of his commitment: he talks constantly of "my roses . . . my farm

Above: John Vaughan

. . . my customers . . ."

In addition to Miami, Continental has offices in London, Frankfort and the Netherlands. These offices are involved in the distribution of carnations, roses, Marguerites, statice, poms and gypsophila from five Colombian farms: Flores de los Andes, Nova, Delta, De la Vega and Colonial.

Nearly everyone at Continental seems quite young. The eight men and women who form the sales staff sit at desks in a room with chalkboards covering the walls. These are their sales charts. The figures are altered constantly as sales are made. Walls in other rooms look less like stock exchanges. AFMC posters, Flower Council of Holland posters, Colombia posters, ski posters and Avianca posters set the tone. The reception area is dominated by a huge aerial photo that shows the enormity of Flores de los Andes.

Americans wouldn't sell roses to Colombian growers at first, so Continental's farms grow 'Visa' roses from French sources.

" 'Visa' has the best shelf life and petal count and the plants can last eight years," Gottlieb says. "We got our foot in the door with 'Visa.' "

The farms grow carnations, pompons and roses, mostly. They have their own labs at Flores de los Andes where they do their own meristemming and clonal selection. This way they keep their mother block up. And they do sell to their competitors.

Though no heating is required to grow in Colombia, weather can pose problems. Have you ever noticed a red edging on your carnations? Or red carns with black edges? "If you see that," Gottlieb explains, "It has nothing to do with the age of the flower. It's actually mechanical damage due to cold nights with real hot days or too much brightness."

Normal night temperatures in the Bogota area are about 50°, according to Gottlieb. He adds that it was unseasonably warm there this year, however, during what would be winter in the US.

Another pesky problem for growers to contend with is not related to weather. Gottlieb claims both types of leafminer infestation seem to have declined. "I'm not seeing much. It's abated since APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) threatened to open all boxes. Many Colombian growers blame their US suppliers of cuttings, such as Yoder Bros., for infesting them with the bugs in the first place," says Gottlieb. Some think it's ironic, therefore, when US authorities make waves about letting them back in.

Journey of a flower

The journey of a carnation from Bogota to the retailer's shop is done quickly and coolly. Flowers are cut in the field (actually poly-covered structures) and toted to the packing shed. Before grading, the flowers are precooled to remove the field heat. Then they are graded (selects, fancies, etc.), bunched and boxed. Then they are precooled for the second time.

Continental's product is chauffeured to the jets in Bogota and also from the jets in Miami in refrigerated trucks. Gottlieb claims they're the only firm in Bogota to refrigerate during the journey to the airport. If the flowers cannot be loaded immediately, they wait in the cool truck.

In Miami, after the 3½-hour flight from Bogota, flowers are removed from the plane in pallets and shifted to a cooler. At 7 am the boxes are broken down according to type and readied for the customs and quarantine people. Flowers are moved again to precooled trucks and shipped by air or Armellini from Miami. Then it's up to the wholesalers and retailers to maintain the chain of life through the rest of the line of distribution.

One airline Continental uses is Eastern. But Gottlieb says there are priority problems sometimes with them. "Eastern will bump flowers to make room for bodies, mail and fish. But flowers are perishable, so they are ahead of hardgoods." Since flowers can take up most of the space on a plane, Eastern has set up a "Flower Desk" and has special commodity rates for flowers.

Gottlieb likes "his" product to sell the same day it arrives in Miami. The flow of product is practically continuous. "We receive flowers six days a week. There are no shipments

Below left: Barry Gottlieb explains Continental's chalkboard "stock exchange." Figures are changed as product is sold. Below Right: Vaughan shows ice pack that begins precooling of roses in the field. Roses are packed with ice in Bogota and Miami.

on Mondays because the people of Colombia are very religious and don't work Sundays. Thanks to his telex, Gottlieb is able to sell product before it even reaches Miami.

The salespeople look at the flowers that come in every day. Roses are monitored for quality. Boxes opened by quarantine agents are often used for quality control since they're already opened. The day of this visit, red carnations in water were being watched and several boxes from the different farms were awaiting inspection.

Growers tread a fine line with rose quality. "So much depends on whether the rose is cut too tight or too open," says Gottlieb. "If you handle 'Visa' right, it will last forever. You can get it in today and use it. It's fine if you cut it under water that's about 100° to 105° and then get it into preservative. 'Visa' opens slow and can sit in a box in a cooler for five days and still be in fine shape."

Gottlieb backs up his appraisal of his roses with one of his many anecdotes. "January was a good rose month. The last week of the month is too early for Valentine's Day, but one of my customers bought 45 boxes of roses at 45 cents per rose. He held them until Valentine's Day and *all of them* stayed good. This guy made a huge profit by buying early at low prices."

Sometimes Continental will hold product, but Gottlieb claims he *always* tells his customers when its held. "I stand behind my product. If someone complains within 48 hours, I'll usually give credit—although there are exceptions. I acknowledge there is stress and that accidents do happen."

He is eager to hear about customers' problems but does not feel responsible for problems due to improper retail handling. Gottlieb sells all his product, but stresses that he tells his customers of any problems and offers discounts.

The former teacher thinks a little education might be helpful to US marketers. "Europeans take tighter flowers. Many Americans think tight is bad, but this is just due to ignorance. They're scared the flowers won't open and aren't used to caring for them.

"The truth is that the more open they are, the more stress there is and the more ethylene is produced. Tighter is fresher. Retailers should be aware, for example, that carnations won't open in the cooler. Give them room temperatures under florescent lights."

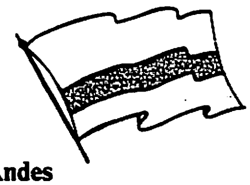
Many farms rotate, or delay processing, going into major holidays. Continental rotates four days.

Continental's profitability depends on the health of the US market. Gottlieb thinks the US flower industry must change. He advises florists to do more promotion and not depend on weddings and hospital work.

"People must be encouraged to have flowers in their homes all the time. The Southflower concept (of José Falconi) promotes this. And the mass marketers have people who are *marketers*. Supermarkets make flowers more visible—and people go food shopping every week."

High markups are also a hindrance. Gottlieb tells a story of his search around Miami for a simple bouquet of five carnations and two pompons. No retailer would do it for less than $10. "Why? I could put that bouquet together for $1!"

Consistency is the key to success, according to Gottlieb; consistency in price, quality and supply.

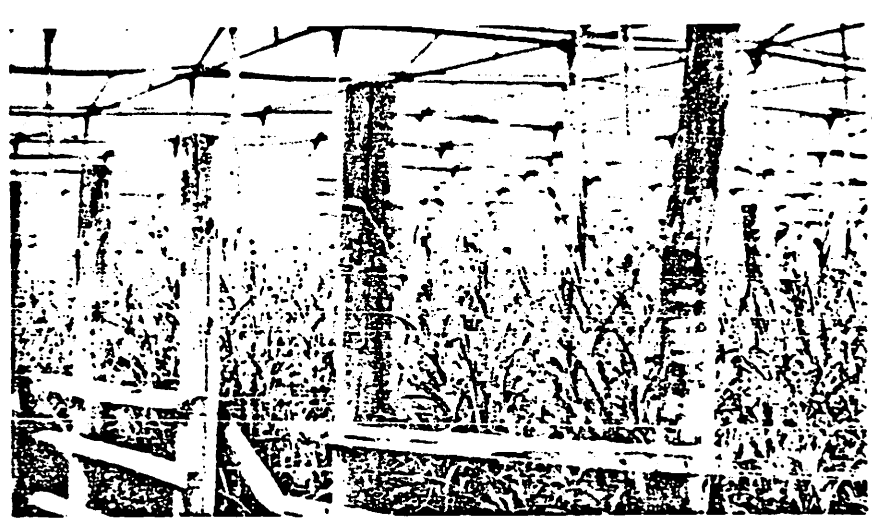


Flores de los Andes

About an hour's drive from Bogota, the poly and eucalyptus structures peculiar to South American growers become evident. Also evident is an abundance of barbed wire surrounding the farms and very strict security. The entrance to Flores de los Andes features a guard toting a shotgun. It's an eerie feeling to be scrutinized by a gun-toting guard and then be cleared to enter the serene beauty of this flower farm. Once inside the farm, ambling along the beautifully landscaped walkway by the long, low whitewashed buildings topped with tile roofs, one tends to forget this is a paradise that requires such bold protection. Colombia seems to be a country where those who "have" live lives edged with danger.

John Vaughan is the manager of Groupo Andes Ltda., of which Flores de los Andes is a part. Vaughan wears the uniform of a businessman rather than a hands-on grower. In fact, he spends most of his time working at his office in Bogota, but gets out to the farm about three times a week.

Below left: Flores de los Andes tissue culture technician examines two mums she's producing. Many women work at the farms, mostly in the fields, as graders and in the labs. Below right: Poly due for replacement droops in the background in one of Vaughan's many carnation houses.



out to the farm about three times a week.

Vaughan (no relation to the Vaughan family in the US industry) and his three brothers, Richie, Jimmy and Harry, head the group. "We started this farm in 1969 with one acre. For my three brothers and myself, this is our life." Richie and Johnny take care of the farms, Jimmy lives in London and markets in Europe, and Harry deals with local markets. Prior to starting flower farms, the Vaughans were rice farmers.

Vaughan grows carnations, roses, pompons and some Marguerites and statice. "In addition, I'm toying with lilies, alstroemerias, freesias and nerine. I have to see how the crops work in this climate."

No heat, lots of labor

Like other Colombian growers, Vaughan's policy is not to heat. Climate is his big advantage. "We work with what we have and only use varieties that will grow under our conditions. Even though OPEC prices are down, not heating is our only advantage."

The Bogota area is ideal for growing carnations. Vaughan sends 30 to 40 percent of his carnations to European markets. The rest go to the US. Jimmy Vaughan lives in London and deals with Scandinavia, Germany, Austria and England. "This business is so complicated, we must shift around. Spain, for example, is developing its growers. We market ourselves; we don't have an Aalsmeer."

Colombian growers cringe when aspects of the US view of their success are mentioned. To Vaughan's mind, labor is *not* cheap in Colombia. "It's very expensive to hire here. The government defends workers and determines labor rules. I can't fire workers, for example. But, if I'm fair, I can do a lot of things."

Other government rules force the growers to provide uniforms and shoes for the workers and a number of benefits, including medical and psychiatric care and transportation.

"Most of our workers come every day on buses from Bogota. In developing countries, a lot of people move to the city." Meals are provided for just a few pesos. In addition, growers provide a severance payment of one month's salary for every year worked.

Inflation is rampant in Colombia, so growers strive to keep costs down.

"We get people to work harder with incentives. We take care of our people. We can give incentives here. It's not like in the US where unions prevent people from working so hard."

Whatever Vaughan's perceptions *of US unions*, his workers must represent a large cost. Consider the cost of his 600 employees at the minimum wage of $8 per day plus about 1½ percent benefits. It adds up.

The Vaughan workers cut flowers three times a day. Like Gottlieb, Vaughan is quick to point out the various stages of precooling that his product goes through and tells of his refrigerated trucks. "Flowers for the US leave for the airport in refrigerated trucks at about 3 or 4 o'clock. At 7 pm the plane goes. Few here have refrigerated trucks. The last couple months (January and February) have been *very* hot. You can get the flowers down to 32°, but if they're out in the sun for just half an hour they're back up to 50°.

"The game is not just growing the flowers. Problems start when flowers leave the farm, but everyone blames the grower. If it snows, it's our fault."

All the farms cut their flowers later for the American market. Europeans want to receive "bullets" or tight flowers, which gives flexibility to the wholesaler. "We used to ship bullets to the US," Vaughan says, "But they wouldn't take them. As soon as the flower shows color, it will open. We used to ship what we had. Now we ship what you want."

Vaughan seems very proud of his grading shed. Of the five farms, this one is most automated, although much handwork is done. Some conveyors are in use and Vaughan is contemplating using them to bring flowers from the field, although that's very expensive. Dutch grading machines have been used for roses for two or three years.

"If you had been here five or six years ago, you'd notice lots of advances. We have to change. New watering and fertilizing systems are big time-savers. We have computerized functions, such as watering, but we're farmers and don't have much of a computer mentality."

A couple years ago, Vaughan was involved in a hypobaric storage research project with Grumman that combined cooling and reduced pressure to create an environment for long-term storage of flowers. It was hoped that flowers could then be trucked to the coast and shipped to the US at less expense, or be held till the market was right. Although the hypobaric storage unit still stands at Flores de los Andes, the project didn't make it.

"Grumman got out," Vaughan explains. "It was too expensive. Sometimes we use it at peak season. We can put flowers in on January 20 and take them out on February 8 for Valentine's Day.

"Colombia contributes to the flower business in general. We try out new things, new ideas."

Arrangements can be made for special orders from the farm. Some US retailers are more willing now to accept the tighter European cut, and they wonder if they can get it although the Colombian growers don't normally ship them anymore to the US. "It is possible to get product from here right to your shop. More retailers must be educated to use tighter flowers."

Like most of the Colombian growers, Vaughan wishes the US growers would direct their attention away from the tariff and duty battles that make it more expensive and difficult for them to ship product into the US. "More greenhouses are being built,"

Circle No. 40

Vaughan claims. "Roses are an important factor here even though we're hammered by Roses Inc. Of course Floraboard is the most important—the only—solution. *Everybody* has to sell more flowers." Although *he wishes* the battles would cease, he says he is sympathetic to the US growers' position.

"The rose is a different animal," Vaughan says. "Some growers you can trust. No matter what, as soon as a rose is cut, its life starts to go."

Roses are precooled before grading. This stops or slows the dying. Roses are graded and placed in water with preservative for a minimum of two hours. Vaughan's roses are packed in ice, sent to Miami, and precooled and iced again at Continental. "They'll be in good shape if the customer takes care," Vaughan promises. He grows no sweethearts because they grow too big in Colombia.

A rose cut at Flores de los Andes on a Monday will ship Tuesday night from Bogota and be on its way from Miami by Wednesday. That rose can be in Boston by Friday since, according to Vaughan, it takes Armellini 32 hours to make the Miami to Boston run. As always, it depends on relationships along the line of distribution.

"This business is all a matter of relationships and goodwill. It's the only business like it in the world," Vaughan states with a hint of amazement. "When we ship there's no guarantee of payment. Economy, relationships and truth are essential."

During our visit, the season was about over except for Mother's Day. Old poly drooped from the structures, waiting to be replaced as happens every 18 months. The greenhouses are simple structures built with poles of eucalyptus (a native tree) covered only by poly. The wood lasts six to nine years. The lower poles near the ground rot first. Vaughan says that David Cheever, formerly of the University of California, designed his structures as well, as the Sunburst Farms' greenhouses.

Vaughan claims to have little problem with leafminers anymore. "We sprayed like hell. Once we had to take all our leaves off for Thanksgiving. Some growers are working to find a biological control. But any grower who tells you he has no problem with leafminer is a liar."

At Flores de los Andes—as at the other farms—the growers are looking to the future. They are experimenting with "Dutch-type" crops such as alstroemerias. Currently Vaughan's uses Dutch rhizomes, but he seems to have a lot of plans.

Somehow Vaughan made the transition from rice farmer to flower grower. After deciding to grow carnations, he came to the US to find out how to do it. At that time, he didn't know all the US industry people he knows now. So he picked up the telephone book in a particular US city to let his fingers do the walking. He found a listing for "Carnation," dialed the number and started asking questions about flowers.

As a stranger in a strange land, Vaughan was surprised to hear the voice at the other end of the line tell him that "Carnation" processes dairy products, not flowers! Groupo Andes Ltda. has come a long way in so few years.

Part II of this story, covering Riverdale and Sunburst in Miami, and Flores del Rio, Floramerica, Floral and Florcaribe in Colombia will appear in the Greenhouse issue, May 5. □