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Ecuador on the rise

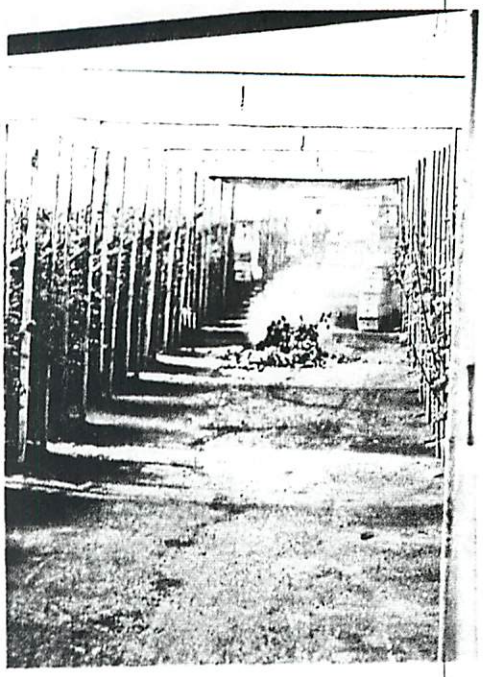
by Teresa Aimone

Wholesalers from Miami to Moscow are asking for Ecuador's cut flowers, particularly roses

"Ecuador is the new blood in the flower industry," says Ned Latif, Inlandes S.A., Quito, Ecuador. "When Ecuadorean growers first started producing roses, they used new varieties. Retailers and wholesalers noticed what was going on.

"They saw that we were creating a whole new model for flower growing; that is why we were successful. We looked at Colombia and the Netherlands and saw what not to do.

"In the beginning, our costs were low. Now costs have increased, so we must be more efficient and keep the quality up. The flower industry has grown significantly, and Ecuador needs to create its own quality standard so it will always have a place in the world market. The Colombian flower industry grew too fast; they lost respect in the United States, and prices fell."

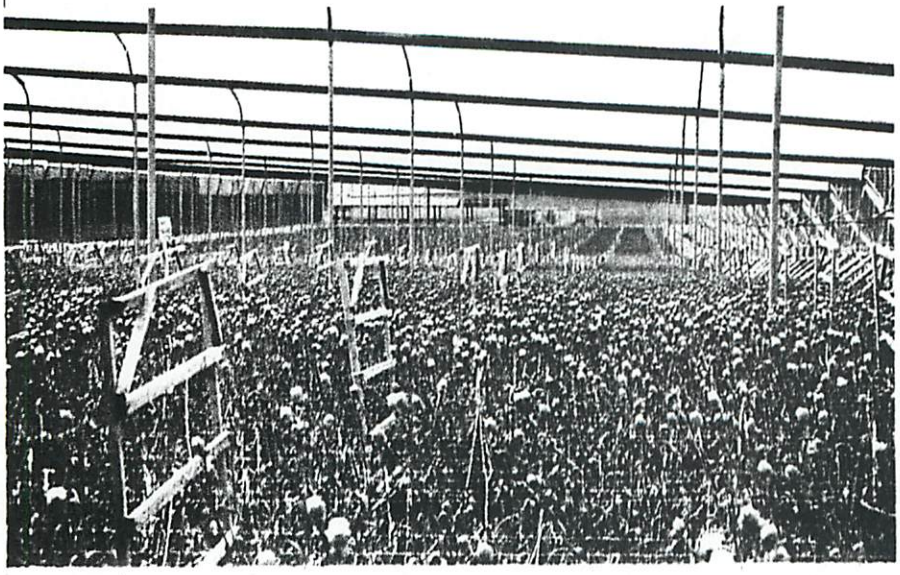


For the first two hours in the morning, piles of rose debris are burned in greenhouse aisles to release carbon dioxide. Here at Mac's Touch, Cotopaxi, south of Quito, plants take longer to flower, but the roses have bigger heads and longer stems.

Ned Latif is representative of the new thinking in this small South American country—a country dwarfed in production area and industry production value by its neighbor, Colombia. But Ecuador, not Colombia, is gaining the flower world's positive attention these days.

The reason? Roses. Rose plants thrive under Ecuador's production: paradise conditions of high light, warm days, cool nights and clean soil. The result is flowers with thick, extra-long stems, huge heads and good keeping quality.

In 1995, Ecuador shipped 25 tons of flowers; approximately 14.5 tons were roses, representing 1,574 acres of production and an export value of $51 million. Currently, 2,640 acres are in production; industry speculation points toward 4,800 acres by next year. The Ecuadorean flower business is booming, with momentum that could propel them to become an even more dominant world player.



All photos: Teresa Aimone

Thirty-four acres of carnations are in production at Ecuaclaves S.A.-Samir. Twenty-four acres are in standard carnations; 10 are in miniature. By working closely with breeders, Ned Latif says he has many new varieties that no one else has. Also at this facility: 2 acres of limonium Misty Blue and Ocean Blue.

But Ecuador has had its problems as a nation. For instance, general strikes just before Valentine's Day closed central roads and forced many growers to airlift production to the airport by helicopter.

But long term, business looks good, with production on the rise and Ecuadorean roses (*labeled* as Ecuadorean ro[illegible]) seen with increasing fr[illegible]cy in North American, Eur[illegible]n, Russian and Japanese mar[illegible] Dutch growers have seen the [illegible]ntages of growing in Ecuador, and several major rose growers are setting up production sites.

FloraCulture International editors visited with Ned Latif, one of Ecuador's leading rose growers, just before Valentine's Day to see what makes production in Ecuador so special.

Inlandes S.A.

"I started growing roses about eight years ago," Ned says. "The Ecuadorean flower business was just getting started, and it quickly grew." Today, Inlandes is composed of four farms, owned by Ned and his brothers. Total production is 264 acres with 120 acres in roses; 24 acres in standard carnations; 9.6 acres in miniature carnations, and 2.5 acres in limonium. Their farms are located both north and south of Quito. All Inlandes farms in the Cayambe region to the north (about two hours from Quito) are located within five minutes of each other. Cayambe is the principal flower-growing region in Ecuador.

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Inlandes also maintains an office called Latif Farms in Miami, and a cold storage facility, Inlandes California, at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). Sixty-five percent of production goes to the U.S.; 40% is shipped either to Miami or Los Angeles, and the rest goes directly from Inlandes to the wholesaler.

Twenty-two percent of his flowers go to Russia, a lucrative market, Ned says. The rest go to Europe, and a small percentage goes to the Middle East. They are just getting started in Japan. Ned's goal: "I want my flowers to be 10% of every wholesaler's sales."

Computers at his facilities in Ecuador, Miami and LAX are all linked together by a special computer program, DFlowers. Ned and his wife, Maria, also operate a flower shipping company in Quito, Ocean Cargo S.A.

COUNTRY PROFILE

The rose variety Virginia is grown here using the bent stem technique. Plants are trimmed to keep aisles clear. While Ned feels they get the same yield over a seven-year period using traditional culture, the bent-stem technique does yield more flowers initially. Note the stem caliper.

Inlandes S.A., Ernesto

This original production range for Inlandes is in the Cayambe region where year-round temperatures average 39F night, 86F day. Production is all roses, with 1.3 million plants in ground beds. Plant age ranges from 1½ to seven years old. Ned says if the price per rose is still the same for a five-year-old plant, there is no reason to pull it out until the normal age of seven years. "We see the return every month per variety, and this gives me an idea of how we are doing in each bed," he says. "We know how much we produce each day, and every bunch has a bar code for postharvest."

Plant density is 30,000 plants/acre, using a multiple row planting. Ned notices differences between varieties. Grand Gala, for example, is more difficult to produce, he says, and yields are just 1.1 flowers per plant per month, but because it's thornless, many American florists request it by name. If they're willing to pay a higher price, it can be as profitable as a higher yielding variety.

A portion of Inlandes' production is grown using the bent-stem technique. Inlandes' production manager Cristobal Alvarez told us, "You get more flowers in the beginning [with the bent stem technique], but later the yield flattens out. For the first three years, production is very high; at four to five years, production is normal, then it declines. With traditional culture, we get the same amount of flowers over seven years." Root stock at this farm is canina and manetti.

New houses at Inlandes are metal structures. While more expensive, they represent a more sound, long-term investment, according to Ned. "When I started," he says, "we had cheap labor. Not any longer. That is why I increased plant density and went to better structures." Average salary is about $166 per month. Employees get free medical care; at his farms he's building a grocery store and a hospital for them. Cost for a metal structure is $0.65 to $0.74/sq. ft. Wood houses are $0.28/sq. ft.

The soil here is a clean, sandy loam. Water is also clean, but pH is 10.0 coming into their ponds. By adding water hyacinths (*Eichhomia crassipes*) to the pond, the pH came down to 7.0. An automatic irrigation system is used to inject fertilizers and acid and to control irrigation. They're using more organic fertilizers and making better use of their composting. In addition to compost and traditional fertilizer, chicken manure is placed around the base of each plant three times per year. "We went from using 2 tons of chemical fertilizers a year to 1 ton," Ned says.

Nabila Flowers S.A.

Nabila, another of Ned Latif's farms, is just minutes away from Inlandes. Located at 0 degree latitude, light levels and day length are nearly ideal. Nabila Flowers has 46 acres of production with 1.1 million rose plants in ground beds. A cable/monorail system runs

through the farm to help move plants more quickly from cutting to postharvest. The goal is to reduce that time to 15 minutes. Ned constructed larger houses to test growing several varieties in the same house, but has decided that 53,800 sq. ft. for one variety is best for his farms.

Plants aren't pinched for Valentine's Day, rather, they're planted. Ned and Cristobal say pinching slows down production, although if they can't expand, they'll selectively pinch plants to increase the number of flowers per plant to take advantage of seasonal peaks in demand.

Sixty percent of the roses grown here are colors; the rest are red. But not one red color dominates. Unlike many rose growers, Ecuadorean growers use several red varieties in their production. Rose varieties include Versilia, Classy, Grand Gala and Timeless. "Versilia has more orange in it than Osiana, but it travels well. It could be a replacement," says Ned. "The Netherlands cannot grow Versilia."

Ned likes to work closely with breeders on new variety development: "I go to Europe three times a year. I want to offer my customers a variety of reds; not just one." He adds that his close contact with breeding companies allows him to trial new varieties sooner. "Right now I have a lot of new carnation varieties no one else has," he says. This helps him meet one of his goals: to enter the market with new varieties to stay ahead of his competitors and command higher prices.

By working with the breeders, Ned says he's helping his wholesale customers meet the needs of their customers. "The retail market is becoming more sophisticated. They used to ask for just red roses; now they ask for Grand Gala," he says. "We should worry about what the face of the flower industry will look like in 10 years. Selling is much more difficult than growing."

Ecuaclavel-Samir Flowers

Roses (only Grand Gala), carnations and limonium are grown at

Ned's other Cayambe range, Ecuaclavel-Samir Flowers. Ned says three growers in Ecuador produce a total of 120 acres of standard carnations. Twenty-four acres are his. Ten acres of miniature carnations are also here. Ned attributes some of the crop's success to Ecuador's clean soil. As yet, fusarium hasn't found its way to Ecuador.

Samir Flowers has 2 acres of limonium Ocean Blue and Misty Blue.

Mac's Touch— One of a Kind

Mac Latif, Ned's brother, has 72 acres of production located 1½ hours south of Quito. This farm is within eyesight of the Cotopaxi volcano. Production is all roses, and plants are grown at a density of 25,000/acre. They started with seven varieties; 45 varieties are now grown. "If a variety is on the market, we grow it," says Rizoan Latif, Mac and Ned's brother and sales manager at Mac's Touch. Latif Farms buys nearly half of the roses from Mac's Touch. Together, Ned and Mac are the largest growers in Ecuador. Eighty percent of Ned's production works off of standing orders; Mac's Touch is at 60 to 65%.

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"At the Cotopaxi farm [Mac's Touch], we get bigger flower heads and longer stems, but the crop time is longer—110 days versus 90 days," says Ned. "There is also excess boron and calcium and magnesium in the soil, so we get less production. We have to inject acid in the water, since it is very alkaline. Also, the soil in Cayambe is better; here it is sandy."

Cheaper land prices, however, have more and more growers taking a look at Cotopaxi. Ned and Mac are also working with the local airport, run by the military, to expand export cargo service (see *FloraCulture International* March 1997, page 32), an added bonus for growers choosing to produce here.

Cotopaxi experienced a hard freeze in December 1996—the first in 50 years. Temperatures were 18F for three hours one night and 25 to 27F for three additional nights. No plants were lost, but there was loss in production. Future plans include installing an evaporative cooling system to raise air temperature and protect foliage. Current freeze prevention methods are a plant-base watering system that turns on when the temperature is 36F and overhead sprinklers that turn on at 34F or less. The Latifs are working with Ludvig Svensson to develop an overhead energy screen that will work with their brand of greenhouses. The screen would automatically close at a certain temperature to hold in heat.

The biggest problem the Latifs face is labor. Cristobal Alvarez explains, "Our biggest problem is educating the workers. In the Cayambe region where there are more growers, employees may have had more experience with greenhouse work. At Nabila, we have an auditorium where each week supervisors instruct workers on flower growing. In the Cotopaxi region, fewer people are familiar with flower growing, so it is harder to find experienced help. However, that can be a benefit, since workers do not come to you with any previous ideas on how flowers should be grown."

The face of the future

Will Ecuadorean production continue its positive upward swing? Innovation and persistence on the part of the growers indicate that it will indeed. As companies from around the world look to Ecuador as both a source of cut flowers and a possible production site, it will be up to area growers to maintain their current high level of quality. As Ned Latif says, "We need to retain customer loyalty. That is what has been lost in this industry." ❑