

NEW ENGLAND GREENHOUSES "GOING TO POT" AS IMPORTS NIP FLOWERING CARNATION INDUSTRY

*Joyce Mariani**

NORWICH--New England greenhouses are "going to pot" as rising fuel costs and low-priced imports nip its once flowering carnation industry in the bud.

Finding it less expensive to import carnations than it is to grow them, more and more domestic growers have been forced to turn to roses, potted plants and other hard-to-import flora in an effort to stay in business.

Others are simply selling out.

The card-house started to tumble when modern refrigeration and transportation made it feasible for Colorado and California-grown carnations to compete in New England markets.

In recent years, however, these same technical advancements have brought the entire nation a more serious carnation contender--the Colombian import.

According to Jay Koths of the UConn Plant Science Department, "the domestic carnation grower is just going to have to give up. We simply can't compete."

As one sign of the changing times, Koths observed membership in the New England Carnation Growers' Association has recently plummeted from more than 80 members to a mere 25.

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DRAMATIC CHANGES IN CONNECTICUT

The change in the Connecticut industry is just as dramatic. The A.N. Pierson Greenhouses in Cromwell, once the largest carnation grower in Connecticut, now grows no carnations at all--roses have replaced them.

Greenhouse manager Stanley Kalish reports Pierson's was growing 185,000 carnations on 110,300 square feet of land in January, 1974. All carnation production was terminated in July, 1975. The greenhouses were then producing only 26,000 carnations on 17,000 square feet of soil.

"Because of the climate of the Colombia plateaus, Colombians need very little heat to raise carnations. They can even grow them outside under saran," Kalish explained. "We just can't compete with that. There isn't any future in carnation growing here."

Other growers echo that sentiment. The Whittemore Greenhouses in Putnam, former carnation growers, sold out to the Buell Greenhouses, who grow only potted plants and specialize in African Violets.

In Stafford Springs, Vice-President Mario Posocco of the Stafford Conservatory Inc. says they dropped carnations "years ago." It's more profitable to deal in hanging baskets, green foliage and holiday flowering plants than it is to raise cut flowers today, he claims.

Although admitting the import situation has made life difficult for domestic growers, Posocco declared, "oil is what hurt us the most up here. If we could get cheaper oil, we'd be in better shape."

Fuel which sold for 8¢ per gallon in the early 1960's is now selling for 40¢ or more per gallon.

Perhaps the only Connecticut florists growing standard carnations in any quantity are the Jewett City Greenhouses, owned and operated by the Demicco family since 1937. But even these greenhouses, wholesale carnation producers since the turn of the century, are feeling choked.

"We have cut our carnation production back about 30 percent over the last two to three years," greenhouse spokesman Dominic Demicco reports. "Like most domestic growers, we're raising more and more potted plants."

During the off-season, from July to October, the Jewett City Greenhouses import "practically 100 percent" of their carnations.

"Some customers prefer our native flowers because we cut them and ship them out the same day. Imports are already two to four days old when they arrive," Demicco explained.

"I suppose you might say we're just 'die hards'," Demicco laughed. "Still, the imports do arrive in good condition, and I predict that within the next few years the local cut flower will be a thing of the past."

A local survey shows this prediction is already coming true. Geduldig's Greenhouses on Jail Hill and Scott's on Lafayette Street in Norwich are both gone. Shea's Greenhouses sold out to Holdridge's, which specializes in potted plants. Johnson's, McKenna's, Ferri's, and Conti's are not growing

much in the way of cut flowers any more. And the same holds true for small growers in Groton, New London, Moosup, Danielson, Putnam, and Willimantic.

IDEAL CARNATION COUNTRY

Most of the imports come from Bogota, Colombia. It has been stated Colombian imports account for 28 percent of the carnations now used in the United States, and that figure is increasing.

Of a total 54,856,000 carnations imported during a 15-week period ending April 10, 1976, 52,419,000 were from Colombia. By 1977, carnations imported during the same 15-week period had increased to 72,263,000 with Colombia accounting for 69,379,000 of these. Over the 52-week period ending December 25, 1976, imports for carnations numbered 204,451,000 with 196,069,000 from Colombia.

Since Bogota is only five degrees north of the equator, days there are almost the same length all year, allowing for constant carnation production.

Elevated approximately 8,500 feet, the carnation-growing plateau in Bogota stretches over an area perhaps only slightly less than half the size of Connecticut. Daytime temperatures there reach into the 70's or even 80 and nighttime temperatures drop into the 30's or 40's year round.

Although night temperatures are a bit cool for carnations, the result is they grow slowly. They are thus of fine quality. Bogota is, then, ideal carnation country.

Flowers are flown into Miami and then shipped by refrigerator truck to New England at a cost of one or

one and a half cents per flower. Domestic freight rates are higher than these international rates--it costs four cents per flower to fly them from California.

Besides this, people in Bogota work for \$3.50 per day as compared to California's \$3.50 per hour pay scale.

The domestic pompon has also been affected by this situation. Last year, 114,762,000 imported pompons found their way into the American market. A full 104,978,000 of these hailed from Colombia, and, like carnations, this figure is also on the rise.

EFFECT IN OTHER STATES

Although Connecticut has been affected by this, Massachusetts has been even harder hit. Boston, once the number one carnation producing area in New England, is gradually closing the doors of its greenhouse industry as owners there are finding it profitable to sell their acreage to housing developers and other businessmen.

The rose, the king of flowers, has replaced the carnation as the leading cut flower crop in Massachusetts. Production in that state has decreased from 39.4 million carnations in 1959 to 9.4 million carnations in 1974. Pompon production has also been reduced from 708 bunches of 1,000 in 1959 to 371 in 1974.

Growers in Colorado have a more serious problem. Property there is not as valuable as it is in Boston, and carnation producers there rely mainly on exporting to other areas of the country. As it becomes less profitable to raise carnations, growers there cannot turn to roses and potted plants if they hope to continue to export because these are difficult to ship.

In the May, 1977 issue of Florists' Review, irate carnation growers in Los Angeles protested that the flood of imports caused red domestic carnations to be left unsold on Mother's Day for the first time in flower history.

IMPORT QUOTA PETITION

In response to this, the national trade association of commercial floriculture, the Society of American Florists (SAF), petitioned the U.S. International Trade Commission (ITC) requesting mandatory import quotas be established for carnations and pompons for a three-year period.

However, FTD florists spoke against such a move. They protested the domestic industry cannot supply the market at peak periods. Availability, quality, continuity, and transportation make the imported flowers necessary to domestic retailers.

The florists themselves are thus divided on the import question. This, coupled with the fact some greenhouses are shifting their production emphasis away from carnations, caused the commission to determine last month the imported flowers were not a substantial cause of injury to the domestic industry.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWERS

Professor Alvi Voigt, leading floricultural economist in the United States, views this as a time of opportunity for domestic growers.

"There is a fantastic demand now for bedding plants, flowering plants, and green foliage plants. Since people are likely to buy plants on impulse,

the demand for these is elastic. The expanding flower market is in plants, not in carnations and cut flowers," he explained.

Declaring he does "not envision the carnation will go the way of the dodo bird," Voigt added, "I think we have an industry that's really strong and has a fine future."

Voigt views the shift to plants as a shift toward a more stable, profitable domestic market.

Although the American greenhouse of the future seems to be a plant or rose-oriented production with perhaps some small greenhouses growing carnations in limited supply for specific local markets, one Connecticut carnation grower has managed to escape.

The reason the W.W. Thomson Greenhouses in West Hartford have remained relatively unaffected by carnation imports is that they grow special varieties of miniature carnations instead of standard blooms.

"When my father developed the miniature carnation 15 or 16 years ago, we switched from standards to miniatures. Now, at least, miniatures are not being imported in any large quantity," Jim Thomson explained.

However, Thomson observed this situation may not last for long, as Colombians are learning to grow and export miniatures as well as standards.

Still, this enterprising family does hold out one ray of hope to domestic carnation growers who wish to continue production. According to Thomson, "If we could perfect a self-sufficient, solar greenhouse we could save on fuel, hire better help, and get right back on our feet again."