Exports in Full Bloom

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Carnations being collected by the workers from the flower beds in the greenhouse. (Courtesy: “Sunday Times”)

The freshness and fragrance of flowers revitalizes and refreshes a flagging spirit, filling the senses with a pleasurable sense of contentment and well-being.

Flowers set the scene for most of life’s important events. Births, deaths and weddings are signified with them. Flowers also eloquently speak the language of love. Many a budding romance has blossomed into full flower with the lover presenting to his beloved a bouquet of sweet-smelling blooms. Therefore it is not to be wondered at that flowers are popular the world over.

Sri Lankan entrepreneurs have been quick to capitalize on this demand, and cut-flower exports have fast emerged as one of Sri Lanka’s biggest money-spinners, steadily growing in importance alongside the main exports of primary commodities, gems and handicrafts. In 1986 alone, Sri Lanka exported over 20,000,000 cut flowers valued at Rs. 50,000,000.

From the Middle East to Australia, Thailand to South Korea and Japan, Sri Lanka has penetrated the cut-flower trade, exporting several times weekly, mainly on the country's national carrier. The entire Singaporean cut-flower market today is dominated by Sri Lanka. Thirty to forty thousand cut flowers are exported to Australia alone, during the winter season. Many exporters of cut flowers were granted the Presidential Award last year for their successful penetration of new world markets, notably that of Japan. This is no mean achievement, especially when one considers Japan's stringent procedures for horticultural imports. Thirty to forty percent of the carnations exported from Sri Lanka are to Japan.

Most of these cut-flower ventures are new, many having been launched during this decade. Several ventures were embarked upon with foreign collaboration, with the approval of the FIAC (Foreign Investment and Advisory Committee) of the Ministry of Finance and Planning.

Sri Lanka houses one of Asia's largest cut-flower farms, numbering over 300 greenhouses in Nuwara Eliya. Carnations are the main commercial product and have proved a best-seller. Other exports of flowers like roses and babies' breath have found ready markets in Singapore and the Middle East.

About seven varieties of carnations are grown in the salubrious climes of Nuwara Eliya, the rich loam in the soil of the region being especially conducive for growing carnations second to none in the world, quality-wise. Carnations are single-petalled and double-petalled and come in a v.,de range of colours, but the standard colours required by the countries importing are red, white and yellow. However, a different type and colour is demanded each year, pastel shades being popular year. Carnations in particular are the popular choice for formal occasions and weddings because of their magnificent colours and their propensity to last long.

Orchids too, when properly propagated, last up to about a month when picked-hence their popularity. Associated in the Western mind with the exoticism of the Orient, orchids have much export potential and Sri Lankan entrepreneurs have recently penetrated the South Korean market as well.

Sri Lanka's tropical heat and humidity is excellent for orchid growing, with orchids flourishing on the coastal belt of the island, from Chilaw to Matara, up to Kandy. Strap Vandas, named for their broad, thick strap-like leaves., are perhaps the most popular orchids on the international scene.

Cut-flower exporters in Sri Lanka are not content with resting on their laurels, however. In their determination to keep the ground already gained in a highly competitive industry, they are presently diversifying exports to include different varieties of foliage and hybrid flowers. Having veered away from traditional exports of roses, carnations and orchids, some of the newest entrants to the industry export hybrid varieties of petunias, rock-balsams and geraniums. The male and female parent plants are grown separately and then carefully pollinated, and the resulting seeds are those of the hybrid plant. The cultivation of hybrids is a slow and exacting process involving about two years of careful experimentation for the propagation of the desired variety.

Major competitors for hybrid exports are Kenya, Israel and Columbia, but Sri Lanka is fast making her name for quality produce on the international market.

The varying temperatures of the tropical island play an important role in the flourishing success of the cut-flower export industry. Export orders for cut flowers are placed a year in advance, and production geared accordingly. Peak periods of business are at Christmas, St Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. Business, however, is continued throughout the year to meet demand.

Since flowers are perishables, they must reach their destination within 24 hours of being picked. Flowers such as carnations are first graded according to colour, shape, shade and stem length, then packed for transportation. Stem length should be at least 70 cm and the flowers themselves should be of high quality, with all petals intact, for a bad consignment could prompt buyers to place their orders elsewhere. Before being transported to Colombo for their flight overseas, the flowers are placed in cold rooms, which ensures their freshness.

The efficiency and expertise required for the job of picking is supplied by women, who range in age from the teens to middle-age. Dexterity and an eye for colour is an essential requirement for the task Most requirements for the trade had to be imported initially, but as the trade has expanded, ancillary industries have sprung up to feed it. Some companies, for instance, specialize in manufacturing the special types of boxes required for packing the flowers for export.

Flower plants can fall prey to fungal infections which attack the roots and prove fatal to the plants, and can also be destroyed by strong mid-year winds. lack of plant insurance in Sri I.anka makes the trade a high-risk one, with the companies' investments of several million rupees at stake.

The Sri Lankan government has recognised the important role played by horticulture in the country's economy by granting tax incentives, grants, depreciation allowances, investment reliefs and duty rebate schemes as incentives for exporters through the Export Development Board (EDB).

Also the Horticultural Society of Sri Lanka recently formulated an action-plan for the promotion of horticulture in the country. •