

Flowers That Travel The Distance



Everywhere you look you see colour. Orange marigolds bob up from the flower beds, their delicate prettiness enticing but misleading; fragile creatures, they last only a few months. Turn to where the cannas plants sprout, tall plants painted in brash colours of red and yellow. A few small pink roses are just emerging; if tempted to pick them, restrain your hand. These delicate roses will travel all the way to Jaffna - their journey is longer than yours.

Words Chiranthi Rajapaksa Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

Flowers always draw attention; no garden is complete without them, but this eye-catching multitude of colours is not something that automatically comes into being; flowers are usually the product of tender care and the growing and selling of flowering plants forms the livelihood of many householders.

In the hills of Nuwara Eliya where the cool climate favours growth, we meet A M N Srimal and his wife Dulani Priyanvada who run a small business cultivating and selling plants.

On the day that we meet them, Srimal and his wife are busy at work on their land. A cold, crisp wind is blowing across the grounds; vehicles drive past on the road. Some stop as the driver spies a flower that catches his fancy. Everywhere there are carefully cultivated plants and pots. Most are flowering plants; marigolds, chrysanthemums, roses and cannas dominate.

As we walk around, most prominent are the plants for which the greatest demand exists, such as roses and chrysanthemums. One of the most interesting things is learning the destination of the plants.

As we watch, a worker carefully loads some plants onto a lorry; most of the plants are sold to customers in other parts of the country or sent overseas. Most intriguingly, the roses we see blooming everywhere are grown for customers in Jaffna. The rose plants are budded and after they are grown and is bear flowers, the customers collect the plants. "Around 500 -1000 plants are taken in this way,

there's a lot of demand from Jaffna," Srimal says. He laughs when we ask in surprise how roses grow in the Jaffna climate. "*Hadeynawa nevei hadanawa*," he replies, "they don't just grow - they are grown, and they can grow anything."

One of the most eye-catching flowers to be seen in the grounds, is the flamboyant *Cannas*, which is also in high demand. *Cannas* are also often sent to Maldives and sometimes to Seychelles. *Cannas* are popular since they can flourish in different conditions, with several types of *Cannas* being grown for different needs. Watching them sway in the breeze, it's difficult to imagine that these delicate plants will travel to such far away destinations.

The tender plants are bought from plant growers in Welimada, who cultivate plants as a home industry. Cultivating plants is not an easy job - though the setting is lovely, the neat rows of plants need constant care. Srimal and his wife work daily in his garden, tending, watering, pruning and doing those tasks which are essential to ensure that the plants flourish.

The most impressive are the roses; exquisitely finished in shades of pink and red, they seem destined for a picture postcard. Among these, other flowers compete. A cluster of bright butter yellow chrysanthemums attracts the eye. In another corner, even a few scarlet strawberries lie half hidden.

One of the most eye-catching of the smaller plants is the Indian Ajuga; its leaves are an attractive mixture of green and purple. Sunlight decides the colour of the leaves. Seeing us admiring it, Srimal tells us, "during the past few days it rained a lot. When the rain stops after a long time and the sun shines, the colour of the leaves change."

The rain has passed and now the plants have brightened in the re-emerging sun. Like people who watch the overcast rainclouds and wait for the sunshine to venture out, these plants too need sunny days to flourish.

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