Peddling In Petals

Posted on
Fresh flowers from cool climates are daily brought to Sterling Flowers

Upali Jayaratne of Sterling Flowers has been providing Colombo with beautiful blooms for nearly 30 years now. He’s as meticulous about his craft today as when he first started.

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The seasonal window display at the St. Anthony’s Mawatha shop

What must it be like to be surrounded by beauty every day of your working life? There can be few careers as aesthetically involved as flower arranging, and the line between work and pleasure must be very fine indeed.

But it’s rare to find an artist with a head for business. Upali Jayaratne, owner and founder of Sterling Flowers, is just that. His job is to blend the creativity of a team of florists with his own business acumen, and he does it well – founded in 1988, today Sterling is one of Colombo’s leading florists.

Upali’s flagship store on St. Anthony’s Mawatha is very busy the day we visit. Colours ranging from the very shocking to the very subtle are blooming everywhere you look. The vibe is of nature and art, harmoniously combined.

After completing his secondary education at Ananda College in Colombo, Upali left for the UK. Floristry was the last thing on his mind. At Middlesex University he studied business management, before qualifying as an accountant. Six years later, Upali returned to Sri Lanka and joined his father’s business in floristry. His natural bent was towards finance and accounting, but rather than do a 9 to 5 job, he opted to set up on his own.

Florists weren’t exactly jostling for space in Colombo at the time. There was no one specializing in weddings, special occasions, and government and corporate functions. Upali saw this opportunity and went for it.

Floristry involves much more than just turning up with a bunch of flowers though. Upali firmly believes in the importance of innovation. It’s doing things differently that gets you noticed.

Most of Sterling’s team of 25 to 30 florists, who all trained on different floristry courses, have been with Upali for a long time. He keeps a close eye on his team’s work and suggests changes to arrangements when he sees fit.

Fresh flowers grown in cool nurseries and gardens in the upcountry are brought by lorry and rail to Colombo. Sterling’s florists make works of art out of these freshly cut flowers – most commonly roses, chrysanthemums, gerberas and orchids – for a wide clientele that includes the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, VIPs, ministries and visiting heads of state.

Upali believes that meticulous care should be taken over each floral creation, even the smallest of birthday arrangements. Meticulousness is a quality a florist should possess, he says, together with the ability to innovate.

The keenest of Sterling’s clients are from the younger generations. It’s something Upali observes around Valentine’s Day in particular, with more flowers sold around this holiday today than they used to be. Christmas and the Teachers’ Day (which is celebrated in schools around the country on 6 October each year) are other particularly busy times. Weddings, of course, are a constant.

Every florist’s shop has its own unique style. Upali can tell which of his competitors has created a particular arrangement just by looking at it.

Moving with the times, Sterling Flowers already does online business. Customers can place orders via their mobile phones too. And from next year, Upali will begin catering to a wider clientele by opening more branches.

He’s cautious about expanding the business too much, however, as managing a florist’s shop is not something you can do remotely. Staying concentrated in one or two locations, where he can keep an eye on things and oversee every creation, allows the personal touch that floristry demands. It is a sentiment that reflects his high regard for quality over quantity.

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