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The Eco Label Scene

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The Eco Label Scene

Making sense of the how horticulture can use eco labels

Now that sustainability has become a buzz word, the certification programs of the world are getting more attention from U.S. growers and retailers.

Europeans have been pursuing third-party certifications for years. Here in the states, we have, of course, USDA certified organic labels, but if going organic isn't in the cards for you right now, there's also a North-American based sustainable certification for called VeriFlora.

What does an eco label mean? It's a way of having an independent third party certify your business/growing practices and give the label's stamp of approval to show retailers and consumers that your practices reach those standards. Each label is a little different in its focus and requirements.

VeriFlora, to date, is the main label in North America. However, a meeting in New Hampshire in September invited Theo de Groot, director of Europe's major certification system, MPS, to educate a small group of growers on the MPS certification and possibilities for certifying players in the North American market. According to the meeting's organizer, Doug Cole of D.S. Cole Growers, the group knew that some buyers are already asking growers to get VeriFlora certified, and this group wanted to know all of their certification options before buyers dictated what they needed to do. (You can read more about MPS and the other international programs in "The Global View" below. Plus, a full report on the meeting will appear in the OFA Bulletin.)

VeriFlora. This is a sustainable certification for both cut flowers and potted plants that's conducted by Scientific Certification Systems (SCS). SCS handles certifications for a variety of industries, and they're also responsible for reviewing the products that go into Home Depot's new Eco Options program. Just this year, SCS also developed a draft national standard for trial use for setting a Sustainable Agriculture Practice Standard through the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), and the VeriFlora certification complies with that draft standard.

VeriFlora certification involves detailed on-site inspections, document audits, in-depth interviews, and annual follow-ups. Growers have to meet criteria in three areas: environmental sustainability (crop production, resource conservation, energy efficiency, ecosystem protection, and integrated waste management); social and economic sustainability (fair labor practices and community benefits); and product integrity (product quality and safety).

Veriflora points out that one of their unique aspects is that they "require growers to develop a plan for converting to organic pest management and soil fertility practices, creating a unified path for organic and sustainable agriculture."

To date, VeriFlora has 20 certified producers in North and South American (Ball Tagawa Growers, Arroyo Grande, California, was recently the first bedding plant grower to achieve this status), as well as eight handlers. —*Jennifer Duffield White*

The Global View

A look at eco labels from around the world

by Marie-Francoise Petitjean

For more than a decade, floriculture—primarily the cut flower industry—has been trying to enhance its image by promoting "Corporate Social Responsibility" and by improving environmental practices. This has materialized in a number of certification programs, or "eco-labels" (approximately 15 worldwide), from various sources: national and international, industry-based and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Here's a look at the main programs on a global level and what they hope to accomplish.

Industry-specific certificates

Floriculture has two international programs—MPS (which stands for Milieu Programma Sierteelt) and the Flower Label Program—and several country-specific programs, with the leading ones being Florverde for Colombia and the Kenya Flower Council's Code of Practice.

MPS has long been the only international eco-label for flowers. "MPS has evolved from environment to quality and social and is now in a position to bring appropriate answers to the whole range of societal matters of concern," says Theo de Groot, managing director. MPS's strategy is to develop and promote programs all along the chain that are appropriate for ornamental products and compatible with company management. MPS's main strength is its environmental scorecard, which allows every party to measure environmental performance through objectives and measurable criteria of input consumption. MPS's Corporate Social Responsibility label has gained international recognition, both by the trade and by NGOs, who have joined in the development of MPS's social chapter. MPS now has 15 different certificates and 5,000 certified members in 38 countries. At least 70% of the flowers and plants channeled through the Netherlands have been certified by MPS in some way.

The aim of the **Flower Label Program (FLP)** is to promote socially and environmentally responsible cultivation of flowers and plants, according to guidelines defined by the International Code of Conduct. FLP standards cover labor; social health and safety; pesticide and chemical use; and environmental protection. The criteria of FLP are controlled by independent auditors, and human rights organizations and unions have the right to make spot checks. FLP has nearly 50 grower members in Ecuador, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Portugal, and South Africa.

Florverde, the Colombian flower industry social and environmental program, was launched by ASOCOLFLORES (the Colombian Association of Growers and Exporters) in 1996. Its goal is to improve social and environmental management by farms, and its code of practice includes three certification levels in the following fields: conditions of employment; occupational health and welfare; and training on environmental issues. It brings training and support to help farms improve production and business practices and create emulation by assessing and benchmarking scores.

Seventy-two Colombian farms are presently qualified by Florverde, representing 3,750 acres (60% of this production area is destined to be exported) and 1 billion stems. Since its inception, the program has also gained in rigor and scope: As of 2003, new standards have been applied and farms are audited by an independent body.

EUREGAP is a retailer-based certification program with the mission of encouraging the adoption of commercially viable farm assurance programs promoting the minimization of agrochemical inputs. EUREGAP has developed a Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) framework for benchmarking existing assurance programs and standards. EUREGAP's terms of reference are based on environmental protection, with standards that are designed to minimize negative impacts of agricultural production on the environment; on occupational health, safety, and welfare; and on animal welfare (where applicable).

The mission statement of the **Kenya Flower Council (KFC)** is to be the lead organization in the provision of advisory, self-regulation and promotional services for the floriculture industry. KFC has been managing two codes of practice. Both codes cover four main fields: environment; good agricultural practice; health and safety; and social accountability. In 2005, the KFC Silver Code of Practice was awarded equivalence status after successful benchmarking against EUREGAP's cut flowers and ornamentals.

KFC has recently reinforced requirements for both codes in terms of records and documentation to ensure the traceability of all farm activities, and it has strengthened its Gold certificate requirements to award companies with "top" practice. As an example, farms wanting to get the Gold certificate must bring evidence of an established, full-quality management system, whose framework is comparable to ISO 14000 and applies strict rules in terms of environmental conservation, water, fertilizer and pesticide usage, health and safety, and social responsibility. The companies must also demonstrate the existence of projects for the benefit of the community: A constructed wetland for waste water management, a day nursery for workers' children, and three months maternity leave are all requirements that Gold members must meet. Among KFC's 59 farm members, four have achieved Gold certificates. The exports from members currently constitute 60 to 70% of Kenya's export volumes.

Social issues and fair trade initiatives

NGOs have been instrumental in raising awareness of floriculture's impact on the environment and corporate social responsibility. Some organizations have developed their own certification or code of conduct, while others started cooperating with existing industry certifications in order to promote a common platform for social standards.

The **International Code of Conduct (ICC)** is one of the results of a wide dialogue between NGOs and workers' unions at the international level. ICC provides a concise statement of minimum labor, human rights and environmental standards for the international cut flower industry. The main items covered by ICC set up the core conditions to most social codes of practice and refer to ILO (International Labor Organization) Convention. It covers 10 main points and is submitted to supervision by an independent body.

The **Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO)**, the best-known member of which is the Max Havelaar Foundation, strives to promote a more just distribution of revenues resulting from global trade relationships, while fostering sustainable development for the communities. The program adds a premium to the price paid on flowers (8 to 12%) to finance development programs for the community. The social and environmental standards that FLO strives for comply with national law and the conventions of the ILO. In the flower industry, where there are few small-holder organizations, the premium is allocated to employee organizations to fund social projects improving day-to-day life. Initially focused on coffee, tea, and sugar, since 2001 the certification has extended its scope to include fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers. FLO's web site reports a strong growth in floriculture, with an estimated 113 million certified stems in 2005 coming from six farms, of which 83 million stems come in under the Max Havelaar label (compared with a total of 21 million certified stems in 2001).

In the United Kingdom, the **Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI)** is bringing together companies, NGOs and trade unions around the same principles of improving social conditions in companies supplying the British market. The ETI code of conduct is also based on ILO Convention. ETI and ICC have almost identical criteria.

A unified consumer label?

Fair Flowers Fair Plants (FFP) is a new initiative established under the auspices of Union Fleurs in cooperation with NGOs and labor unions, with the purpose of establishing a common platform for world codes of conduct supporting flowers and plants cultivated in a sustainable manner. The FFP label is for all links in the production chain, from producers to traders and retailers.

More than any other program, FFP intends to reward and communicate the efforts made by all links in the chain towards the consumer. FFP is growing fast, with 200 members, growers, traders and retailers in 15 countries. The strongest participating countries are the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and Sweden.

Want to Know More?

- VERIFLORA: www.veriflora.com
- SCS: www.scscertified.com
- MPS: www.my-mps.com
- FLP: www.flower-label-program.org
- FLORVERDE: www.asocolflores.org
- KFC: www.kenyaflowers.co.ke
- FFP: www.fairflowersfairplants.com
- EUREGAP: www.globalgap.org
- ICC: www.flowercampaign.org
- MAX HAVELAAR: www.maxhavelaar.com
- FLO: www.fairtrade.net
- ETI: www.ethicaltrade.org
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