

Uganda gets ready for

Uganda is often described as the Pearl of Africa but how much is really known about this country, so ideal for cut flower production?

By Jeroen van der Hulst

The Uganda flower industry is neither as big nor growing as fast as the neighbouring Kenyan flower industry. The total Ugandan flower industry consists of just over 20 flower farms and covers a surface area of nearly 200 ha. Still, Uganda's exports have progressively increased over the past seven years by, on average, 25% per annum, as did the value of these exports. Getting ready for the future, Uganda grows flowers in its own way.

Perfect conditions

Keith Henderson, executive director of the Uganda Flower Exporters Association (UFEA) describes the climate as follows: "With two rainy seasons per year, there is ample water for irrigation all year round from lakes and swamps that never dry out. Even in locations further from the lakes, water can be found only a few feet below ground. Unlike Europe there is no heating cost for Uganda flower production and temperatures around Lake Victoria range from maximum 28°C daytime down to around 18°C at night.

Achievements to date are largely accredited to the strength of the UFEA, which encourages growers to share experiences and increase their knowledge; Ugandan growers are here photographed during a greenhouse open day.



These are perfect conditions for the production of gerbera, anthuriums, sweet-heart and intermediate roses, and for cuttings production. Further to the west in the higher land altitudes, night temperatures drop to 12°C enabling large headed roses and a wider range of other cut flowers requiring cooler night temperatures to be grown. The soils are also very fertile."

Own rose varieties

As mentioned the warm climate is very suitable for the growth of chrysanthemum cuttings, which in hectareage terms is the second most important product. At the same time the warm average day temperatures place rose growing in a very special position when compared to the neighbouring countries: comparing similar varieties, Uganda can achieve high volumes but with a lower than average stem length and weight. This often results in lower prices on the regular flower markets. Since the introduction of new, locally bred varieties, Ugandan growers hope to realise some changes in these aspects and profit from some new market possibilities.

Airport cooling facilities

Most of the companies are located near to the shores of Lake Victoria, where fresh, good quality water is a never failing essential resource. There is also the advantage that they are close to the Entebbe airport, which means short travelling distance along reasonable roads to the airport. Here, cooling facilities are available to provide ornamentals with an optimum start to their journey along the cool supply chain.

Keith Handerson says: "Flower farms located near Lake Victoria around Kampala have a maximum two hour drive to Entebbe airport, and the higher lands in the west are only five hours drive away on good tarmac roads. Because export floriculture is now well established in Uganda it also has a well established, dedicated infrastructure at the airport for cut flower cargo handling. Ample cool chain facilities are already available to handle the increasing volumes of cut flowers being shipped out of Entebbe and air-freight rates are on a par with Kenya, therefore regionally competitive.

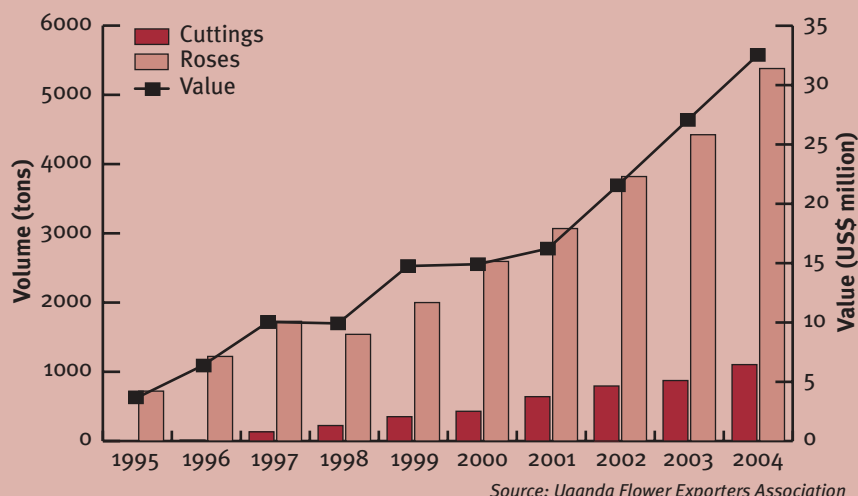


Uganda Flower Exporters Association (UFEA) executive director, Keith Henderson.

a bright future



Figure 1. Volume and value of flower exports from Uganda, 1995-2003.



"The Government of Uganda strongly encourages export led growth and almost all inputs for flower farms are allowed in free of duty. The Government is stable and the security situation in Uganda is very good, especially around Kampala, Lake Victoria, and in the western highlands. Potential investors should not be discouraged by reports of rebel activity on the northern border which has no effect whatsoever on the flower producing areas."

Local substrates sought

Although most of the roses are still being cultivated in soil, the switch to substrate production, carefully started in 2002, has now entered an accelerated development phase. More and more companies are starting to use cocopeat, some predict that they will have completely converted to substrates by the end of 2005. With the support of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), PPO Glasshouse Horticulture has recently started a search for cheaper, local substrates.

A selection of materials, which have the

potential to become growing substrates, are being characterized and will be tested on Ugandan farms from March, April of this year. The use of substrates will reduce the use of soil disinfectant chemicals and will allow re-circulation of the nutrient solutions. Both of these production concepts are seen as important measures to reduce the impact that the sector has on the environment.

Trained personnel

Another essential element for sustained growth is the availability of a skilled workforce. Whereas other developing countries need to rely on foreigners, or must train people exclusively on the job, Uganda has a pool of well-trained farm managers to rely on. They are graduates from the Applied Tropical Floriculture (ATF) course, which has been conducted over recent years by the University of Makerere with USAID-funding. As its name suggests, it is a very practical study in which students combine work experience at the flower farms and take theoretical lessons. These lessons are nevertheless also being given at

farms in the region around Lake Victoria, and this year at Wagagai, to facilitate assistance for the students without them having to travel all the way to Makerere.

The ATF course is one of many plans Ugandan growers have with regard to training and development. Together with Wellant College and PPO Glasshouse Horticulture, Ugandan growers are working on an ambitious plan to have their own training and development centre. This will provide training at all employee levels, from directors through to supervisors, sprayers, flower processors and crop maintenance personnel, as well as being used to conduct applied research to solve specific growing problems.

Growers association

All of these achievements would probably never have been possible, at least not on such a large scale, without the existence of the UFEA. All farms are members of this strong association, represented by its executive director Keith Henderson, whose ability to coordinate complex projects has led to many of the mentioned improve-



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Stem quality improvements are expected from the introduction of new, locally bred rose varieties.



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ments in the industry during 2004. Within the frame of this association, growers operate as one industry, share knowledge, look at each other's farms, train their staff, fight for incentives from their government and obtain subsidies and funds from foreign donors for specific projects. It is perhaps not a booming business, but certainly a good example.

Henderson comments on the sector's current position and future potential: "From zero production 10 years ago Uganda now exports 6,300 metric tonnes of flowers and cuttings per year, employs 6,000 people, and brings in annual export

revenue of US\$32 million (Figure 1). The industry is presently growing at 25% per year. There is plenty of land available for expanding existing farms and for setting up new farms. Foreign and local investors are made equally welcome in Uganda, and there are excellent schools available at all levels.

"The Uganda National Floriculture Industry Strategy Plan calls for a doubling in size of the flower sector from its present 180 ha to 360 ha by 2007, when it is expected to be employing 10,000 people, contributing significantly to poverty eradication and bringing in annual export rev-

enue in excess of US\$50 million. We now need more existing product from existing farm expansion, and to expand the range of flowers and cuttings for export in order to achieve economies of scale and minimise freight rates.

"Investors from European countries are being encouraged to come to Uganda and set up their flower farms here and interested parties should contact the UFEA executive director, and also the Uganda Investment Authority for more information." (www.ufe.com, www.ugandainvest.com)

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