

# Getting roses for Valentine’s Day? Thank these Colombians, and their massive annual flower airlift

To get fresh flowers to North America by Feb. 14, it takes thousands of workers, careful planning and a fast-moving supply chain. Here’s how it works

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The flower growers of Colombia like to say their business is half agriculture, half logistics. It’s hardly a stretch, especially as they prepare for their biggest day of the year. For Colombia’s flower giants, Valentine’s Day alone accounts for 80 per cent of annual profit. “It’s huge,” says Augusto Solano Mejia, executive president of Asocolflores, the Association of Colombian Flower Exporters. So is the effort to stock shelves with enough flowers for customers typically looking to buy on just two days, Feb. 13 and 14. Colombia, the world’s second-largest flower exporter behind the Netherlands, ships about 650 million stems overseas for Valentine’s Day. Two-thirds are roses, the vast majority destined for the United States and Canada. To keep the blooms vibrant as they move thousands of kilometres to supermarkets and florists across North America from greenhouses outside of Bogota, the industry stages what might be the planet’s most colourful airlift. In the weeks before Valentine’s, Colombia’s flower workers prepare the roses for shipment: snipping, sorting, dethorning and packing. Thorns are such an unwelcome feature that buyers place a genetic premium on varieties with fewer spikes. Hue matters, too – in particular red, which makes up more than half of the Valentine’s roses exported by Colombia’s biggest companies. The current genetic champion of the Colombian-grown red rose is the German-bred Freedom variety, described as possessing a “true red” and “near perfect colour.” Once the flowers are packed, they are loaded onto trucks, which make 13,000 deliveries to airports in Bogota and Rionegro (traffic jams in Colombia can threaten to spoil Valentine’s in British Columbia). Narcotics police X-ray each box before workers put them onto more than 650 cargo flights, most destined for Miami. There, cargoes are loaded onto trucks and dispatched across the continent. A single Boeing 747 can carry nearly two million stems,

and the volume of flower flights before Valentine’s roughly triples the country’s typical air-cargo movements. The extra flights fly south empty, ultimately adding to the price of the flowers. Transportation makes up nearly a third of the cost of a Valentine’s rose, and the imperative to squeeze in stems means most flights leave after midnight, when cooler, denser air allows jets to take off with more weight. The temperature inside is crucial. Roses travel best at between 1 C and 3 C. Any warmer, and blooms may wilt before the eight to 10 days of life the industry seeks inside the homes of Valentine’s recipients. That means moving fast. A single rose can be inside a Toronto distribution warehouse within five days of being snipped from an Elite Flowers greenhouse outside Bogota. (Elite is Colombia’s biggest flower exporter and supplies Loblaw’s and Costco in Canada.) All of this requires huge numbers of people. Around Valentine’s, Colombian flower growers hire tens of thousands of additional labourers. The industry has been accused of making beauty out of exploitation by sucking unsustainable quantities of water from local aquifers and exposing vulnerable workers to carcinogens during shifts that can last 22 hours. Many hires are women, and labour-rights advocates have documented employers requiring pregnancy tests and birth control. Elite says it hires many people from conflict areas, paying them enough for Valentine’s and Mother’s Day work to sustain their families year-round. Elite alone operates 1,100 hectares of greenhouses in Colombia, the equivalent of 1,500 soccer fields. Even that is not enough to sate Valentine’s demand, but expanding is tricky. A single rose plant yields about 15 flowers a year. Only two or three can be used at Valentine’s. “If you plan everything for Valentine’s Day, it’s not good business the rest of the year,” says Alvaro Canache, Elite’s manager of logistics. “Nobody,” he adds, “understands what is behind making Valentine’s Day happen.”



Left: An Elite Flowers employee selects roses ready to be cut at one of the company’s Colombian greenhouses last month. Once the flowers are packed, they are loaded onto trucks, which make 13,000 deliveries to airports in Bogota and Rionegro.



Left: An Elite Flowers employee builds a bouquet of roses in the company’s greenhouse outside of Bogota, Colombia, last month. For Colombia’s flower giants, Valentine’s Day alone accounts for 80 per cent of annual profit.



Far left: Dozens of workers sort, dethorn, pack and label roses at one of Elite Flowers’ facilities in Facatativa, Colombia, outside the country’s capital, Bogota, last month.



Left: The top of Elite Flowers’ facility is seen in Facatativa, Colombia, last month. The company alone operates 1,100 hectares of greenhouses in the country.