

Bernhard Bürgisser, Agrotropic and Tropiflora:

"Multiples' interest in certified flowers has grown enormously, particularly over the last year "

"I think the maximum market share for certified flowers - i.e. flowers which have been cultivated with consideration for the environment and working conditions - is closer to a hundred percent than fifty percent. Interest in these flowers amongst the multiples has grown enormously, particularly over the last year," says Bernhard Bürgisser, owner/director of the Swiss import business Agrotropic and co-owner of nurseries in Kenya and Sri Lanka.

Agrotropic specialises in the import of flowers grown outside Europe. The company sells these flowers to both wholesalers and multiples in Switzerland. The flowers come primarily from Ecuador, South Africa, Kenya and Sri Lanka. These latter two countries are home to nurseries for alstroemeria, spray roses and foliage which operate under the name Tropiflora Ltd. and in which Bernhard Bürgisser is a partner.

The Swiss market is generally seen as a trailblazer when it comes to certified flowers. According to Bürgisser: "Switzerland is still in the lead in this regard. Switzerland has always demanded top quality products, and 'intrinsic quality' has definitely been added to that in recent years. Organic food, clothing which has been produced in an environmentally aware way, and the Max Havelaar products all have a large market share, primarily as a result of initiatives by supermarkets which are blazing the trail. But more and more is also happening in this area in other countries such as Britain."

Max Havelaar

Max Havelaar, for which MPS Socially Qualified serves as the basis, is very well-known and widely appreciated, says Bürgisser. "The concept of setting and monitoring standards and the flow of money back to the employees in developing countries is very popular in Switzerland. The organisation is also very well-known. The Max Havelaar label lends a lot of added value to products from developing countries; consumers like buying flowers without any negative associations. It's as if flowers have regained the innocence which they lost a few years ago. The sale of Max Havelaar flowers in Switzerland is still growing very rapidly. Particularly in the past two years, it has achieved a level we never even dared to dream of."

MPS very welcome

It will come as no surprise that Bernhard Bürgisser is also enthusiastic about MPS. "Since the start of the Nineties there has been widespread criticism in Switzerland of the conditions at nurseries in developing countries, especially Colombia. It's true that the conditions at some nurseries were poor, but it certainly wasn't the case across the board. The problem was that we had no response to this criticism, because there were no generally accepted standards and no serious figures."

MPS was therefore very welcome, he argues. "Because only by using MPS could we demonstrate the facts and compare the various nurseries. MPS also soon introduced standards for the safe use of pesticides."

Tropiflora Ltd. in Kenya took part in the first MPS pilot project in Kenya. Bürgisser says: "At the first qualification in 1997 we got 42 points. We found that very disappointing, because we thought that we were already being very responsible with regard to the environment. We have further improved the situation since our first qualification, and our most recent qualification produced 85.3 points. We have also achieved the MPS Socially Qualified certificate."

Tropiflora Ltd. in Sri Lanka had to wait an number of years before it could take part in MPS. "We couldn't find any growers to start a pilot group. Tropiflora, like Green Farms Sri Lanka, has now become an individual MPS member. Both companies are now also working on the qualification for MPS Socially Qualified."

Further expansion

Bürgisser believes that MPS is a valuable management tool for growers and a good way of incentivising growers to cut down on their use of chemicals. "MPS Socially Qualified also helps growers to achieve and maintain high social standards - which also benefit the growers themselves, incidentally."

MPS appears to dominate the flower market worldwide, according to Bürgisser. "Further expansion is therefore definitely on the cards. What I believe is lacking is a European consumer label for flowers grown with MPS-A and Socially Qualified."

MPS and MPS Socially Qualified are valuable and widely recognised labels in the flower world, he claims. "In my view there is only one other label which is really accepted in the market, and that is FLP. "So I think it's an excellent idea that the two labels will be combining forces in the new Fair Flowers & Plants consumer label."
