

# The search for roses without thorns

QUITO

**An industry tries to clean up its image**

**A**SK an Ecuadorean and you may be told that the reason the country's roses grow so splendidly tall and straight is that they are striving to reach the equatorial sun, straight overhead.

Whether or not that is myth, the country's cool Andean valleys certainly offer ideal growing conditions for roses and produce luxuriant blooms. No wonder they are much in demand on St Valentine's Day—making Ecuador the largest exporter of cut flowers to the United States after Colombia.

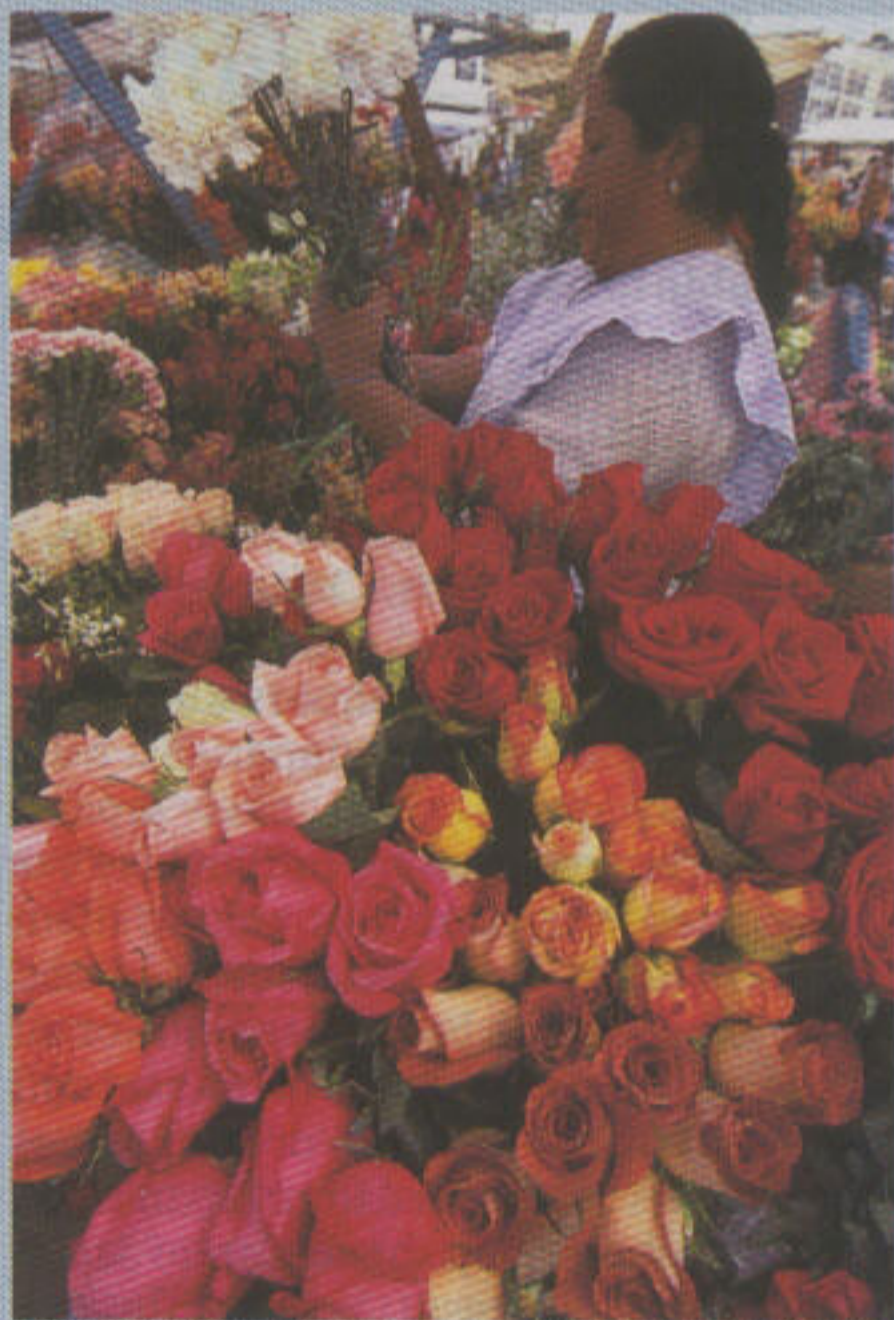
But there is a less romantic side to the flower industry in Ecuador, as there is elsewhere. Critics complain that it employs child labour, and that workers have suffered from exposure to pesticides and punishment for trying to form unions. Some growers are now trying to rid themselves of any unsavoury images by using such unlikely weapons as compost and chicken droppings. Ecuador has become Latin America's largest supplier of organic and "environmentally friendly" roses, using natural fertilisers.

Roses, like lovers, are temperamental. They are prone to bugs. But John Nevado, a Swede, proudly tells visitors to his 40-hectare (100-acre) rose farm, that his flowers have been treated only with low-toxicity pesticides. He says his business meets a host of labour, social and environmental standards. He plans to move into large-scale organic growing. "It is both a matter of conscience and a matter of business," he says.

Exporters representing almost three-quarters of the country's rose beds have applied for certificates to show that they meet basic environmental and labour standards. Under another programme, almost 500 workers who were under 18 have been registered. Those younger than the minimum working age of 15 have been sent back to school.

All this comes at a price. Though the market for "green" and "organic" flowers is growing in Europe, it is small in the United States. Since Ecuador adopted the dollar in 2000, its rose-growers' costs have risen compared with their Colombian competitors'. Yet Ecuador has held its own. Its flowers tend to be slightly larger and showier, and Colombian growers are adopting many of the same labour and environmental standards.

The rose industry has injected much-needed cash into some of the poorer and more remote areas of the Ecuadorean Andes. Many of the workers are women, which has shifted the balance of economic power within families. If it can continue to do that without harming its workers' health, the industry may yet acquire a truly romantic image.



**The sweet smell of chicken droppings**