

The Evergreen Rose Plantation

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In flower language, yellow roses symbolize dying or platonic love. Reports from Latin flower plantations usually deliver new as bad as getting yellow roses delivered to your doorstep. In Ecuador, the largest exporter of roses in the world, the flower industry has a grim reputation for child labor, hazardous working conditions, and reckless use of toxic pesticides. But things are lightening up. The recent environmental concerns in the industry have led to change, and increased good will from the growers has been accompanied by sustainable financial growth.



This year, The World Economic Forum picked Ecuadorian-based rose farmer, John Nevado, to join their Young Global Leaders initiative for his work in sustainable agriculture. Young Global Leaders is a forum of thinkers and doers from all over the world, utilized in Davos to provide a wide spectrum of insights on various issues.

Nevado Roses, a 100-acre former cow farm located in a small village outside Quito, has transformed life for the locals by employing 500 people who were formerly season workers or unemployed. About 60 percent of the employees are women who have especially benefited from their newfound economic power. Nevado Roses provide them with three weeks of vacation and free day care for their children. 25 percent of their salary is automatically deposited to an account at the local food market to lessen the destructive impact of husbands spending the money drinking or gambling. John gives a tour of the remarkably clean and efficient looking farm, explaining how it took seven years to invent their tiger-striped rose, “Red Intuition,” while Ecuadorian women are picking flowers to the sound of classical music. Every part of the process, from planting to packing in cartons marked “Size Matters” (the roses are about 6 feet tall) is shown to visitors.

John, a native Swede from central Stockholm, and his Spanish father, Roberto Nevado, had no connection to Ecuador prior to buying the farm. Roberto, who was already in the flower business, saw a demand for luxurious roses, and decided to go out and find investors.

Ecuador has three features ideal for rose growing," John says. "It's located on the equator, which means the roses are exposed by sunlight straight overhead. It's on a high altitude, over 2500 meters, and it gets cold at night, which is when roses grow. Only two other places on earth, Ethiopia and Columbia, feature the same conditions.

What was it like arriving in Ecuador with a couple of bags and starting a rose farm?

The Ecuadorians welcome Europeans with open arms. We immediately got access to key people, were invited by the country's minister of finance and so on. The rose business is one of the most important industries in the country, yet they are happy to let an outsider in because they want to learn. Ecuador is still a young country with a young economy. It's easy to start a company and the system for taxes are much easy to navigate.

What was the hardest part?

It is a third world country and the infrastructure is in horrid condition. At one point, the Indians protested against the government by cutting down trees over the highway, preventing us from transporting our roses to the airport. Surprisingly enough, the military came to our rescue and flew the roses out with helicopter and military plane. They understood that diminished income to a national company affects everybody.

Why did you decide to go organic and certified?

I have been engaged in environmental matters since I was a teenager, and always thought it was the greatest issue of our generation. But it also made sense from a business perspective. This was the way I saw the market was going.

Does the average consumer really see the point of buying organic flowers?

More in Europe than in America, but the more pressing issue from a business point of view, is to avoid oil dependency. In addition to the fact that our roses need to be transported all over the world, most fertilizers are made out of oil. We have now imposed a close to zero tolerance for toxic pesticides. The farm is a closed eco-system. Everything is recycled and we fertilize with chicken droppings.

What are the effects of your eclectic collection of certificates?

BASC is a certificate for ensuring nothing but roses leaves the country in our boxes. The industry has a big problem with drug dealers using rose boxes to smuggle cocaine. Now, the trucks shipping the roses from the farm to the airport are equipped with a GPS-chip that keeps track of where they go and if they make a stop somewhere on their way. Getting certified in every way possible has also spurred productivity. ISO-certification for example, means that every little procedure, down to how to serve guests water, has got a manual. That has allowed us to employ and work efficiently with uneducated labor.

Could your employees ever work anywhere else, though?

With the certificates comes courses in, for example, project management for the employees. We are also part of a program, which means that if you buy one of our roses in Switzerland, twelve percent of the consumer price goes directly to a fund for my employees. So far they used the money (about \$50,000 USD) to build an internet café and a micro financing institute. This year's project is a local craftsmanship college.

How is the micro-loan system working?

Really well. When sums are small, people pay back.

Nevado Roses and other farms adhering to the same principles have now turned Ecuador into Latin America's largest supplier of organic roses. John and his father are prolific speakers at flower conventions, educating the industry about their methods. They are not under-emphasizing the profits, which have allowed them to buy more land in Ecuador as well as in Ethiopia, both currently in preparation to hold branches of Nevado Roses.

Without profits you will not convince anyone that sustainable agriculture is the way to go. Especially not at Davos. After all, it is a capitalist's party.

Lastly, since we have you here. How do I make those roses last?

Make a long cut about one inch, and put them in a clean vase with clean cold water, preferably with ice cubes. Spike the water with aspirin and Sprite. Just as aspirin thins the blood, it thins the water molecules making it easier for the rose to absorb the nutrients. Sprite contains industrial fine granulated sugar, with molecules small enough to be taken up by the rose. It also comprises small amounts of fungicide, which prevents the water from going bad. Change the water every second day and keep them out of draft and direct sunlight. Sad roses can perk up if put to soak in the tub for while.