

Protea power driving South African floriculture



How can South Africa's indigenous flora help battle climate change impacts?

Whilst South Africa enjoys international renown as an exporter of fruit and wine; its cut flower industry has tended to slip under the radar. Yet, exports of cut flowers and foliage grew by around 40 per cent between 2017 and 2021, reaching a value of \$82 million, meaning that South Africa is the third-largest exporter on the African continent behind the giants of Kenya and Ethiopia.

A DISTINCTIVE NICHE WITHIN GLOBAL MARKETS

Interestingly, South African flower production is dominated by indigenous products such as Proteas, pincushions, and greens, which originate from the Cape Floristic Region – one of the planet's most biodiverse areas.

These unique and beautiful plants claim a distinctive niche within global markets. In recent decades, the so-called 'Cape Flora' sector has undergone a transformation from its rustic beginnings, based on the harvesting of flowers from wild landscapes, to a model that combines wild harvesting with a modern sector that cultivates higher value species such as Proteas. Wild foliage and cultivated flowers are combined into bouquets that have gained popularity within the UK and European markets in the last decade. The growth of the bouquet export market has triggered modernisation within the industry, leading to higher product quality. In turn, this has benefitted sales in the local market. A decade ago, locally produced flowers had a tawdry image in South Africa due to low production standards. Now, high-value and mass-market Cape Flora products are retailed widely in South Africa as quality has improved markedly.

CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGES

Climate change challenges may constrain further significant growth. The Mediterranean climate of the Western Cape is becoming more variable as extreme weather events, such as the 2015-18 drought, occur more frequently. Water scarcity is a highly political issue as the needs of people come into conflict with the needs of agriculture. However, commercial actors are responding to such challenges. For example, Cape Flora exporter Fynbloem designed its bouquet production facility in Rivieronsderend with circular economy principles to the fore. Measures have been put in place to achieve water-neutral status, energy demands are minimised via smart design features, and all categories of waste are recycled. These features act as cost-saving measures in their own right whilst futureproofing the company against risks such as water shortages and energy price rises. Furthermore, Cape Flora species are efficient water users as they evolved to thrive in a water-scarce environment. The wild-harvested sector has declined in recent decades as cultivation has increased. But Cape 'greens' are still harvested in their millions and are important for bulking out and adding colour contrast to bouquets. Unfortunately, these stems are poorly valued in economic terms despite the contribution they make to bouquet design. Prices have declined substantially in real terms over the last decade to the extent that they could soon become uneconomic to harvest, which resonates with the experiences of wild foliage exporters across the globe. Wild foliage, which grows naturally without chemical supplements or additional irrigation, can be produced with very low environmental footprints. Therefore, the global cut flower industry should value it more highly as it positions itself as a sustainability champion in the fight against climate change.

David Bek is a Reader in Sustainable Economies and co-leader Sustainable Production and Consumption Cluster Centre for Business in Society Faculty of Business and Law at Coventry University.