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Sustainability

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Ideas about sustainability and commercial flower production extend well beyond the type of cover used in greenhouse construction. Dr David Bek, Reader in Sustainable economies at Coventry University UK and co-lead on the Centre for Business in Society *Sustainable Cut Flowers Project*, has spent over a decade researching the cut-flower industry supply chains and asking the question “what does a sustainable flower look like?”

By Rita Feldmann

Sustainability and growing for the future

In late August last year, when Melbourne was in the depths of the second lockdown, a mini tornado passed through Silvan in Victoria’s Dandenong Ranges, destroying half of TNT Flowers’ polytunnels. Six weeks later, amongst the snapped poles and twisted arches, the flattened snapdragon plants readjusted their horizontal trajectory and moved towards the sun; the gutsy though diminutive stems giving rise to perfect flowering heads.

Although greatly devalued in the commercial world, 536 bunches of the extra-short snaps delivered an exceptional amount of joy to St Vincent’s Hospital employees, thanks to generous individuals who sponsored buckets of the blooms to be picked and delivered for distribution by St Vincent’s in-house Staff Well-being Officer.

issues because Australia still does not have capabilities to recycle the plastic onshore, and badly soiled plastic presents problems for recycling – this material ending up in landfill. But if this material is part of closed loop system, with efficient collection and cleaning systems and processing of used plastic back into new materials, then there are arguments for polytunnels being a justifiable use of plastic, especially given their function in efficient horticultural production.

Considerations of sustainability and growing extend far beyond the plastic problem. Dr David Bek and *Sustainable Cut Flowers Project* co-lead Dr Jill Timms have been looking at the question “what does a sustainable flower look like?” in the context of the £2 billion UK industry which imports around 90% of flowers. Despite the UK focus, many of the ideas presented through the project’s website and Sustainable Flowers Guide are useful references for growers across the globe wanting to adopt more sustainable farming practices. Part of the project has been the creation of a sustainable flower standards assessment tool which looks at different practices within growing and floristry. For flower growers, this incorporates subjects such as chemical, energy, water and plastic use, waste management (including organic waste), impact on local habitat and biodiversity, and the treatment and conditions of employees and workers.

As Dr Bek Explains, the starting point for any consideration about sustainable practice is acknowledging the different ‘pillars of sustainability’ – People, Planet and Profit – and thinking about these factors, recognising areas of potential impact and trying to make better choices.

As with most ideas about sustainability, each subject is considered on a sliding scale - from most sustainable to least. And as with ideas about growing food sustainably, local and seasonal growing is often the starting point because, as Dr Bek says, “‘local and seasonal’ is a proxy for minimal input/resource-use production”. From economic and social perspectives, going local is associated with benefits to the local economy and enhancing a sense of community identity and belonging for those associated with an enterprise.

However, as Dr Bek points out, localness does not necessarily mean that production systems are using lower input approaches. “People tend to think of small-scale production as being undertaken by growers who are committed to the ideals of sustainability. We



Short but sweet snapdragons.



Buckets full - ready for delivery to St Vincent’s Hospital

However, despite the charitable purpose of the event, a promotional Instagram post (in association with the Sustainable Floristry Network) attracted criticism from one user, including the statement ‘There is nothing sustainable about plastic houses’. This generated some passionate responses from other growers and raised important questions about what it means to grow sustainably.

Sustainability and commercial flower growing is a complicated subject that cannot be defined by a single variable like hothouse construction materials. It is true, plastic use does present disposal