



A Beginner's Guide to the Floral Supply Chain

A quick-read resource for newcomers to the floral industry

Q: Who are the key players in the floral supply chain?

A: From seed to centerpiece, a lot of hands touch each flower before it reaches a customer. The main players include breeders, growers, importers, wholesalers, and retailers.

What to Remember:

- **Breeders** develop new flower varieties based on color, vase life, disease resistance, etc.
- **Growers** cultivate those flowers (domestically or internationally).
- **Importers/Brokers** coordinate shipping and customs, usually through Miami
- **Manufacturers** develop and produce hard goods such as vases, ribbon, plastic bouquet sleeves, floral foam and more.
- **Wholesalers** source from many growers and sell to florists, studios, and retailers.
- **Retailers/Event Florists** design and deliver flowers to the end consumer.

Q: Where do flowers come from?

A: The floral supply chain is global and complex. Domestically, there are 10,216 floriculture producers, and that number has been growing. In 2023, the largest producers were California, Florida, Michigan, Texas and New Jersey. Up to 85% of the flowers sold in the U.S. are imported, primarily from Colombia, Ecuador, Canada, the Netherlands and Mexico. Of note, Ecuador is known for its roses because its elevation and location near the equator are prime growing locations for growing roses year-round. The Netherlands are a large producer of bulbs and bulb flowers, such as tulips and lilies.

Here are the top sources of fresh-cut flower imports:

1. Colombia \$1.35 B, 60% of market share
2. Ecuador \$560.4 M, 25% of market share
3. Canada \$113.02 M, 5% of market share
4. The Netherlands \$82.98 M, 3.7% of market share
5. Mexico \$41.53 M, 1.8% of market share

What to Remember:

- **Most flowers are imported:** Around 85% of flowers sold in the U.S. come from other countries, especially Colombia and Ecuador.
- **Different regions grow different blooms:** Ecuador is known for roses; the Netherlands for bulbs like tulips and lilies.
- **U.S. growers are still strong:** Over 10,000 domestic flower farms operate across the country — especially in California, Florida, and Michigan.

Q. How are flowers grown?

A. Growing flowers is a detailed, science-backed process that starts with breeders developing new varieties and ends with farmers cultivating them under specific conditions. Growers use greenhouses, different soil types, and specialized care to ensure each flower meets quality standards. It often takes years to develop a new flower that's beautiful, hardy, and long-lasting.

What to Remember:

- **It starts with breeding:** New flower varieties can take over 10 years to develop and are tested for color, vase life, and disease resistance.
- **Different farms, different methods:** Growers use greenhouses, open fields, and various care routines depending on location, climate, and flower type.
- **Sustainability is growing:** Many farms use natural pest control, fewer chemicals, and environmentally responsible practices to grow healthier flowers.

Q: What affects a flower's color and size?

A: Even when grown from the same variety, flowers can look noticeably different depending on where and how they're grown. Factors like soil type, altitude, temperature, and farming methods all play a role in the final size, shape, and color of a bloom.

What to Remember:

- **Location matters:** Soil, altitude, and climate differences between regions can affect a flower's size, shape, and color — even within the same variety.
- **Farming practices shape the flower:** Use of greenhouses, fertilizers, and harvest timing all influence how a bloom looks.
- **Natural variation is expected:** No two farms grow flowers exactly the same — and that's okay. Slight differences don't mean lower quality.

Q. How do flowers get to retailers?

A: Flowers grown outside the U.S. are usually flown to major hubs, primarily in Miami but also in Los Angeles and New York. However, sea shipping is increasingly used - especially for floral holidays in which large amounts of flowers need moved. From the ports, the flowers are picked up and distributed to wholesalers or markets throughout the country via trucks. The same goes for domestically-grown flowers, which are typically trucked to wholesalers or markets, where they are then delivered to retailers.

Flowers travel a long way from farm to florist, often crossing borders and relying on a tight timeline. Weather, customs, freight issues, and even labor shortages can create delays or force substitutions.

What to Remember:

- Delays can happen at any point: farm, airport, customs, trucking.
- Communication with your supplier is key.
- Flexibility and pre-planning make substitutions smoother.

Q. How do flowers stay so fresh from farm to customer?

A: Flowers stay fresh thanks to a carefully managed system called the cold chain, where flowers are kept cool every step of the way. From being cut at the farm to arriving at a shop or event, temperature control, hydration, and proper handling help preserve their beauty and extend their vase life.

What to Remember:

- **Cold temperatures are key:** Flowers are kept around 34°F during storage and transport. Even a few degrees warmer can shorten their vase life.
- **Clean handling makes a difference:** Clean buckets, tools, and water prevent bacteria that shorten flower life.

- **Flower food and fresh water help:** Using the right hydration solutions and changing water regularly keeps flowers vibrant longer.

Q: Why are some varieties harder to find or more expensive?

A: Some flowers require more time, space, and resources to develop and grow. New varieties can take over a decade to breed, and licensing costs are passed down the chain.

What to Remember:

- Garden roses and trendy colors often cost more.
- Supply and demand, seasonality, and labor all affect price.
- Supermarkets may purchase entire farm inventories, creating scarcity.

Q: Why do some flowers last longer than others?

A: How long flowers stay fresh, known as *vase life*, depends on a mix of factors. Breeders work to create strong, long-lasting varieties, but everything from how the flower is grown to how it's stored and handled affects its lifespan. Keeping flowers cool, clean, and hydrated is essential from the moment they're cut to the moment they're enjoyed.

What to Remember:

- **Genetics play a part:** Breeders test flowers for traits like vase life, durability, and freshness before they're grown commercially.
- **Care along the way matters:** Cooling, hydration, and gentle handling during transport all help flowers stay fresh.
- **What you do counts too:** Clean tools, fresh water, and flower food help extend life once the flowers reach the shop or home.

Q: What's new and next in the floral industry?

A: Sustainability is at the forefront, with breeders and growers focusing on disease-resistant varieties and eco-friendly practices. Innovation is also making once-specialty flowers more accessible.

What to Remember:

- Look for certifications and sustainable practices.
- New flower varieties continue to expand design possibilities.
- Consumer interest in mental wellness is driving more everyday flower purchases.

Pro Tip: "Flowers are not meant to last forever - they're here to bring joy. But with the right care, that joy can last longer."

Adapted in part from the SAF Next Gen LIVE! session: "So You Think You Know Flowers" Panelists included experts from across the supply chain, from breeders and growers to retailers and event florists.