



# The Flower Industry in Colombia: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Globalization

*By Sharika D. Crawford*

Why Colombia adorns your dinner table with roses and the consequences of this flourishing industry for American growers and Colombian workers.





The words, “Colombian imports” usually brings to mind coffee and cocaine. It’s true that these two products have shaped the economic and social history of Colombia for much of the twentieth century. But they are not the only Colombian exports. One of the most important exports from Colombia is flowers, in particular, long stem roses. This has had far-reaching effects in countries like the United States since the 1970s. So how did this happen? Have these effects been positive, negative, or both? What can looking at the floral industry in Colombia tell us about global networks since the end of the Second World War?

## Background

In 1810, Colombians gained their independence from Spain. They quickly worked to build a stable government and good economy. The ruling class sought out foreigners to invest in their country. They believed foreign investment would improve roads and wharves. They hoped it would create new businesses. Like other nations in Latin America, foreign investment in Colombia came with positive and negative effects. To attract foreign business, the government gave them special privileges. This often upset locals. But foreign investment did improve the economy in the short-term. Foreign companies built new railroad and telegraph connections between agricultural and mining communities in the middle of the country and coastal ports. Ships brought goods overseas, stopping in Caribbean ports along the way. Political violence would often disrupt business, but Colombians continued to export goods to international buyers. Unfortunately, this business came crashing down in the 1930s due to the worldwide Great Depression.

After the Second World War, Colombian leaders decided not to rely on foreign investors. Instead, they focused on domestic growth. They promoted industrialization. Colombians began making goods that they once bought and imported from other countries. In the short run, some Colombians lived better. Many rural people found jobs in cities, which led to increased urbanization. However, the economic growth didn’t last. This was partly because Colombia never fully industrialized. Leaders depended on borrowed money from foreign banks to buy equipment and technology to start new industries. By the 1980s, Colombian businesses were unable to pay foreign creditors. A decade later, the government had to borrow money from international organizations like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to pay off high interest loans. In exchange, leaders had to agree to cut government spending on state-owned industries, eliminate government jobs, and recruit more foreign investment. Keeping these developments in mind, let’s look at the rise of the floral industry in Colombia.



*Map of Colombia showing the major cities, mountains, and rivers.*  
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## The Good

On Valentine's Day in 2018, Americans purchased more cut flowers than in previous years. Roses remain the favorite. The vast majority of roses bought at grocery stores likely came from the Colombian highlands. Although Colombians do not celebrate the holiday, a 2018 *Washington Post* article reports that Valentine Day sales made up 20 percent of the Colombian floral industry's annual revenue. These profits are evidence of the strength of the Colombian floral industry, which only burst on the market in the 1990s.

In 1991, the United States Congress approved the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA). The goal was to dissuade Andean growers from harvesting coca, the plant that makes cocaine. ATPA lowered tariffs, or taxes on imports, from four Andean countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. During the height of the War on Drugs campaign, American politicians looked to stop the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. While ATPA was unsuccessful in reducing cocaine production, it did have a stunning outcome. Some Colombian landowners began to grow and export cheap flowers to U.S markets. They took advantage of their mild climate to grow flowers year-round. They also benefited from the lower tariffs. Many imported farm equipment to increase crop yields (harvests). Even more growers started farms near to the international airport to save on transportation costs. With flying technology, Colombian flowers can easily arrive to U.S stores within hours. During the peak season around Valentine's Day, there are 30-35 fully loaded flights a day carrying flowers to Miami. The results are clearly positive for Colombian industry. Colombia's flower industry earns a billion dollars in profits per year and employs 100,000 low skilled workers. Nearly half that number work in related jobs such as distribution and marketing. These results suggest how globalization has "flattened" socioeconomic inequalities across countries.

## The Bad

Despite the stunning economic strength of the Colombian floral industry, it is not an entirely rosy picture. While Colombians export 60 billion stems each year to countries as close as the United States and as distant as Japan, the number of flower growers in the



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U.S. steeply declined in the past thirty years. Free trade agreements between nations improved farm technology. Combined with faster air transport and availability of low wage laborers, Colombian floral producers could dominate the U.S market in ways that were unimaginable fifty years ago. In 1971, the U.S imported 100 million blooms of flowers. Three decades later, it imported 200 billion flowers, which has led U.S flower producers to withdraw largely from the floral market. Thus, the growth of the floral industry in Colombia has meant the decline in American flower producers.

## The Ugly

In addition to the decline in American flower growers, intense debates continue over the quality of Colombian flower industry's work environment. Sixty percent of the nearly 100,000 Colombian flower workers are women. Many are single mothers. Human rights organizations and industry observers have collected complaints of sexual harassment by male supervisors, long working hours without breaks, and over exposure to pesticides and other chemicals. Some evidence suggests that children as young as nine years old have had to work all day on Saturdays in greenhouses alongside their mothers. Despite a series of reforms to address child labor and working hours, labor activists continue to criticize the poor work conditions. To compete with global flower growers, Colombian flower farmers must control costs even at the expense of its employees.

## Conclusion

After midcentury reforms failed to bring long-term prosperity or resolve socioeconomic inequality, Colombian leaders returned to foreign capital and foreign investors as key to economic growth. Some sectors of the economy, including the flower industry, have benefited from a reintegration into the global economy. They have managed to feed the demand for cheap, long-stem roses and other flowers in countries around the world. With airplanes to ship them to markets quickly, farm equipment and a mild climate to grow flowers during all seasons, and a supportive government, Colombia flower growers dominate the U.S market. But while owners of flower farms make a good profit, their employees make low wages and work in difficult conditions.



*Colombian flower worker. Public domain.*



## Sources

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