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Wilting flower sales mean good deals for Valentine's Day shoppers in South Florida

By Doreen Hemlock | South Florida Sun-Sentinel
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Tough economic times are hurting flower sales, and suppliers expect less spending on roses and other blooms for Valentine's Day — perhaps down by 20 percent or more.

"People will still buy. They just may not spend as much. Not everyone will want a \$100 arrangement. Some may want a \$19.99 bouquet," said Christine Boldt, executive vice president of the Association of Floral Importers of Florida, a Miami-based group.

Valentine's Day sales typically represent about 40 percent of a retail florist's yearly business.

Importers in South Florida, the cut-flower capital of the United States, are also feeling the pain. Roughly two-thirds of all cut flowers sold nationwide come through Miami International Airport, mostly farmed in Colombia, Ecuador and other Latin American nations.

Flowers are such big business that Miami ranks as the top U.S. airport for international cargo, with flowers its No. 1 import. Consumers may get a break amid the industry turmoil.

Worried they will be stuck with extra flowers, some retailers are offering discounts to clients who order early. Davie-based **Field of Flowers** offers roughly 20 percent off Valentine's Day orders placed this week. This year's emphasis is on less-expensive arrangements with shorter-stem roses, said founder and President **Donn Flipse**.

Flower sales have been wilting for months. Flipse said revenue shrunk about 10 percent last quarter from a year ago. To cut costs, he shut one of his three stores — an outlet in Coral Springs. He shifted delivery for that area to his Davie and Boca Raton units.

To boost business, Flipse aims to buy up more of his smaller rivals, closing down their stores and adding their client lists and phone numbers to his operations. He's also partnering with national groups such as 1-800-Flowers, filling their orders for local delivery. Other flower retailers are increasing TV exposure. Los Angeles-based Teleflora, an association of independent florists, advertised Sunday on the Super Bowl for the first time in its 75-year history. "During these hard economic times, Teleflora wants to help our members generate sales and foot traffic into their shops," group President Shawn Weidmann said in a statement.

Flower farms in Latin America, which depend on Valentine's Day, are anxious, too. Growers reduce shipments for months before the holiday, pinching roses to make sure they bloom for mid-February, Boldt said.

A few South American farms have folded. As prices for fertilizers and jet fuel soared last year, some found their profits so squeezed they could not cover higher costs. Banks have been tightening credit to growers too, stung by the U.S. financial meltdown, Boldt said.

Other industries might boost generic advertising to increase sales. But the flower industry — unlike milk, potatoes or avocados — has no national promotional campaigns it can ramp up, perhaps extolling the benefits of flowers to lift spirits, Boldt said.

Nor does it help the industry that Valentine's Day falls on a Saturday this year.

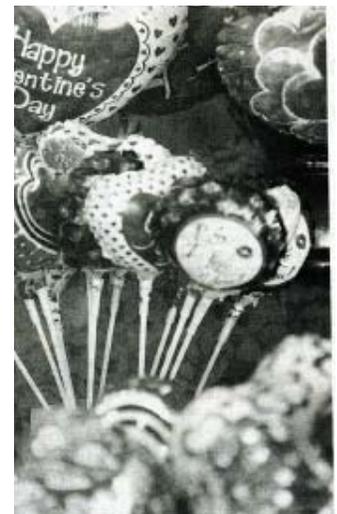
Valentine's Day flower sales tend to be higher on weekdays, when buyers — mainly men — send blooms to partners at their workplaces. On weekends, men sometimes choose a romantic dinner and the theater over flowers, florists say.

Flower sellers aren't alone in their troubles. A new survey for the National Retail Federation estimates consumers will spend an average \$102.50 on Valentine's gifts and merchandise this year — down 16 percent from last year's \$122.98 per person.



Susan Stocker, Sun-Sentinel

Ana Cecilia Haynes, a floral designer for **Field of Flowers** in Davie, works on an arrangement of roses. Field of Flowers is offering more value arrangements as an alternative to alleviate declining sales.



Davie-based **Field of Flowers** offers roughly 20 percent off Valentine's orders placed this week to help control inventory.