

Business

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Economy, timing takes toll on South Florida's flower industry

The flower business is far from booming this Valentine's Day -- a fact that has not gone unnoticed in Doral, where more than two-thirds of the nation's flowers are repackaged for delivery to wholesalers and retailers countrywide.

This year, besides the poor economy, the holiday is a victim of timing. Valentine's Day falls on Saturday, and Monday is Presidents' Day, meaning many will skip the flowers and go out instead over the three-day weekend.

"Regardless of the economy, when Valentine's falls on a Saturday or a Sunday it is notoriously bad," said Hilda Varela, vice president of Associated Farms, a Doral-based importer. "Men for some reason will not send flowers to the home. They'll send it to your job because they'll get the 'oohs and aahs' from the co-worker."

In the weeks leading up to one of the nation's busiest floral holidays, Doral importers anticipated these factors and ordered fewer flowers -- even fewer red roses -- than past years. And they didn't hire extra help.

The signs are visible at Miami International Airport, where truck drivers who used to wait up to eight hours to pick up shipments during the holidays are only waiting three.

Bunny Schreiber, an aviation cargo specialist at MIA, hopes the cut in wait times are more of an indication that the airport has streamlined the process. "There are more inspectors today. And they've made a bunch of minor improvements," she said. "The industry is working much better with the federal agencies these days."

The flower industry remains a significant part of the local economy.

Roughly 86 percent of the approximately 4.5 billion fresh-cut flowers imported into the United States every year comes through Miami and ends up in Doral.

If you took flowers out of Miami, 7,000 would be out of a job and MIA would be out of its top perishable import, which raked in \$681.8 million in local sales in 2007, according to analysis of U.S. Census data by World City, a Coral Gables multinational research firm.

Last year's sales dipped by 4 percent, but industry experts predict a steeper decline in 2009, possibly up to 30 percent.

"At Valentine's Day last year, the economy wasn't nearly as bad as it is now. Even in May, when Mother's Day hit, the economy was softening but nothing like what we are experiencing today," said Ken Roberts, president and CEO of WorldCity.

More than 90 percent of the flowers shipped to Miami are handpicked, graded, boxed and cooled to 33 degrees in Colombia and Ecuador.

Once shipments arrive at the airport, the cargo is inspected by U.S. Customs and Border Protection and refrigerated trucks transport the flowers to one of the 100 importers located in Doral warehouses, about five miles from MIA.

That amounts to quite a burden on the city, county and state officials to make sure nothing interrupts the flow of trucks to and from warehouses.

One traffic light that stays red for too long or roadwork that causes delays along Northwest 25th Street -- a main thoroughfare for truckers -- equals a shipment that wasn't delivered in time, money that was lost and a job on the line. Importers have partnered with county and state officials to monitor traffic issues.

At their warehouses, importers refrigerate the boxes and repackage them for delivery.

While the process hasn't changed, the workload has. Importers say they have tried everything, including dropping prices, but the demand is just not there.

"Yeah. We are feeling the hit from the economy," said Christine Boldt, executive vice president of the Association of Floral Importers of Florida. "Flowers are not a necessity. It's not like bread and milk where people have to have flowers to live."

The floral industry is hoping that by focusing on the benefits flowers provide people will purchase them even in bad times -- even if they opt for the \$12.99 bouquet at the supermarket instead of the \$89.99 one from the flower shop.

According to the National Retail Federation, roughly 36 percent of the people who bought flowers last year said they're going to buy flowers this year.

"They may not buy as much, but they'll buy," Boldt said.

Amid all the gloom, some importers remain optimistic.

"People may stop buying jewelry, but because flowers are a relatively inexpensive gift they can still buy flowers," said Carlos Bermudez, sales manager at The Bouquet Collection, a Doral-based company that ships ready-made bouquets to supermarkets.