

# Wake up and buy British blooms

Support local growers for fresh and fabulous seasonal cut flowers, says Sarah Raven

Last summer, I made a programme for *Gardeners' World* about the British cut-flower industry. We asked why so many of us are concerned that our strawberries are flown in from the other side of the world, but aren't bothered by the fact that 90 percent of the flowers we buy are imported.

Britain has one of the best climates and some of the best growers in the world. Why are we demanding not just strawberries 12 months of the year, but roses and peonies as well? And why don't we celebrate the fabulous flowers that we grow here so well – roses, sweet peas, peonies, dahlias, lilies, narcissi, lily of the valley and tulips – when they're naturally in season?

Last week, at the cut-flower wholesale market at Nine Elms in London, this campaign took another step. The New Covent Garden Market Authority arranged an event that matched British growers with London florists – Helen Newman of Moyes Stevens, Kally Ellis of McQueens, Mark Welford and Steven Wicks of Bloomsbury Flowers, Jamie Aston of Jamie Aston Flowers and Alison Trickey of Pollen Nation.

The audience was florists from all over the country. All these professionals face the same question: when a flying Dutchman arrives outside your shop twice a week at a civilised hour with a lorry full of refrigerated flowers, what's the point of getting up early and going to the hassle of sourcing British flowers from the market?

There are plenty of reasons. Apart from supporting your own local growers, the lorry contains a narrow selection of flowers that the trader knows are likely to sell. There won't be unusual things, or delicate flowers with a limited shelf life – often the loveliest – as these are high-risk.

If you want to be inventive in your flower arranging, you have to dig deeper. Fantastic things are available from specialist British growers. We had sweet peas (Greenlines Nursery); scented stocks (J. Pell and Sons); alstromerias in deep, rich colours (Geaters); huge-headed roses (Country Roses); great bunches of lilac (Porters Foliage); clove-scented English garden pinks (Whetman Pinks); pink, fluffy peonies (Tregothran Estates); exotic and dignified calla lilies in crimson, deep orange and white (Copsseys);



Top row, from left: David Sandy, Preseli Orchids; Donna Duthy, Country Roses; Ron Geaters. Middle: Carolyn Whetman; David Bacon, A&F Bacon; David Guscott, Greenlines Nursery. Bottom: Sarah, left, interviewing Alison Trickey, Pollen Nation; John Waddington, Copsseys; Richard Hyde

cymbidiums (Preseli Orchids) and vast, amazing lilies (H.W. Hyde & Son) all under one roof. That's just a few of the flowers available in May.

Through the year, different crops come and go but supplies continue even through the winter. And there is another very apparent advantage to this home-grown clutch – powerful, good old-fashioned scent. Even in the early-morning cold, the market smelt like a Parisian perfumery. And many florists vouch for the fact that British-

grown flowers have a longer vase life. Many growers deliver stems harvested the night before three times a week, so these flowers are as fresh as you get.

There is one downside to British-grown flowers that I keep hearing from florists: unreliable supply. It is true that field-grown crops are vulnerable to the vagaries of our weather. If you have designed a wedding around a sea of sweet violets and they fail to come in, it is time to panic, but that should not rule out

greater flexibility on other jobs and types of arrangements. It may take extra effort to begin with, but as more of us ask for British flowers, better systems of distribution will evolve.

As with going to a farmers' market and deciding what meal to make after your trip, rather than before, if you can go with the flow a bit more you'll get the best flowers available. It is so much better and more creative to buy what looks fantastic on the morning than to rely on a prescribed list.