

Biological

Biobloem sets out to expand biological production

A pilot project which includes 2000m² of glasshouse has been set up for the year-round production of biological flowers. Some people are convinced there is a market for these flowers.

In an ideal world biological roses would be available all year round. There appears to be a certain market for them. But so far it is impossible. Even to supply a biologically grown bouquet of flowers all year round is an enormous step. It is possible to buy biologically produced flowers but usually only from a local supplier, such as a farmers' market or at a local shop. A continuous supply which lasts the entire year and supplied on a professional basis is still missing although it seems that this could be about to change.

A group of researchers, traders and growers in the Netherlands are starting a project called "Biobloem" translated Bioflower. The primary aim is to assess, aid and stimulate year-round production.

Eosta, a leading Dutch wholesaler of organic fruit and vegetables, is part of the project through its subsidiary Florganic which is 50% owned by flower processor Intergreen and 50% by Eosta.

Maarten Vrensen, of Florganic says he is certain that there is a market for biological flowers, saying that "the market is so small at the moment that it can only grow".

Together with Dutch research institutes PPO (Applied Plant Research and Environment) and ATO (Agrotechnology & Food Innovations) the group wants to fill the gap in both the cultivation and marketing of biological flowers. To achieve this a pilot project covering 2000m² of greenhouse is being set up because cultivation in a greenhouse is absolutely essential if it going to be at all possible to grow biological flowers year-round.

At the same time as the pilot project is underway, ATO will be researching why consumers buy biological flowers and how much extra they are prepared to pay for them.

The next step is to see how growers, wholesalers and supermarkets can best bring it all together

Expanding range

"We will start the project by asking the wholesalers to suggest varieties for biological production," said Karst Weening, project leader (Remark KW: Gerard Welles is officially the Project Leader, you could qualify me as 'initiator of the project' for BioBloem at PPO. "Then we will look for people who know all about the specific cultivation of these crops to see if it is also possible to grow them biologically at a reasonable cost price. We shall also look at what kind of investment is necessary."

"Biobloem will try and determine ways to expand biological production," says Vrensen.

"Firstly we expect to see an expansion of products which are easy to grow, such as sunflowers, and then the introduction of a wider range."

But the supply of a good bouquet doesn't just require a wide variety of flowers it also depends on a sufficient numbers of stems.

"If you want to offer a certain bouquet from June to August then all the ingredients have to be available in reasonably large numbers," said Weening.

Currently, the majority of the biological flowers sold by Florganics are grown in the Netherlands but some come from the Bordeaux region of France, Italy and one supplier sends wild grown proteas from South Africa.

“Many growers believe it is too difficult to grow biological flowers because mostly they are involved in mono culture and biological production does require crop rotation,” said Vrensen. “Also, biological production at the moment is more at risk from diseases, especially because many of these growers are cultivating outdoors.”

By offering advice from the experience gained from the pilot project, Biobloem hopes it can attract more growers to biological production methods.

“There are not yet enough greenhouse growers involved in biological production and it will be necessary to develop this area,” says Vrensen.

Organic pays

Grower, Sjoerds Veldt, grows a range of biological cut flowers such as sunflowers and alliums as well as perennials and bulbs outdoors on 4 ha in Akersloot, the Netherlands. He has been doing it for ten years prior to which he was a traditional grower.

“I thought then that there was a market for biological flowers and there is. It pays much more otherwise I wouldn’t be doing it because it is more work and there are more risks involved,” he said.

Not involved in the BioFlower project, he says that whether or not he expands his assortment in the future will depend on the market. (remark KW: Sjors is indeed not directly participating, but the PPO researcher are working together with him, at his nursery, in order to tackle various problems with some of his flowers.)

Vase life

The project itself is also looking at ways to extend vase-life by developing environmentally-friendly vase-life preservatives because we cannot use chemicals, says Vrensen.

That is why Pokon and Chrysal has joined Biobloem.

“We are joining the project to clarify many of the questions raised by biological production,” said Jan Janssen of the company which has become synonymous with plant care products.

“We want to see what biological really means because the rules about must be clear.

“For example 99% of our preservative product, that is the sugars and acids, come from nature but we might find that the sugars have to be grown organically,” he said.

Karst Weening will be satisfied if the project can stimulate the biological sector in the Netherlands to double in two years.

“Then the sector will be big enough and have enough critical mass to further continue by itself,” he said.