



STILL BLOOMING

Internet sales, non-flower items such as gift-baskets and toys, and trialling campaigns to expand the size of the retail market, are some of the influences growing this sector.





Above Interflora New Zealand website.



Right Wedding table setting by Renaissance in Queenstown.

Opposite Minimalist table centre piece by Belle Vie in Wellington.

Meanwhile, new interior design trends – particularly a softening of the strict minimalist look – are influencing flower fashions and encouraging bolder arrangements and colours.

According to the most recent figures available from Statistics New Zealand, Kiwi households spent \$83m on flowers in the June 2004 year. Industry research suggests less than a fifth of the population buy flowers on a regular basis – far fewer than in Europe and North America – meaning there’s plenty of scope to expand the market.

“What we are trying to do is make the whole market bigger so everyone can grow.”

Other issues facing the industry are how to encourage suppliers to stay in the business and how to encourage more growers to join it. Currently, many growers are approaching retirement or are based on land that is being sought by developers.

In the 1990s, New Zealand’s floriculture industry was on a par with its wine industry, says Paul Armishaw of flower auction house FloraMax – a division of Turners & Growers. “Since then, the wine industry has rocketed ahead while the flower industry has grown slowly.”

To stimulate sales, FloraMax helped to set up a promotional group involving retailers and growers that aims to encourage Kiwis to buy more flowers. The group’s first promotion has involved a radio and poster advertising campaign, based on the theme ‘Flowers Work Wonders’.

Funded from a charge on all transactions through FloraMax’s flower auctions, the promotional group has been operating for almost a year. FloraMax decided to get involved in setting up the promotional group because the fragmented nature of the flower industry means there is no single body to promote it, Armishaw says.

“We took a bit of a risk by doing this. Buyers could have said they wouldn’t pay the one per cent charge but our

experience, so far, is that they have been very supportive.”

New Zealand’s relatively low level of flower buying – compared to Europe and North America – suggests there is an opportunity to increase sales, he says. “What we are trying to do is make the whole market bigger so everyone can grow.”

FRANCHISE

Growing the market is also the aim of Jeeva Nathan, one of the few franchise operators in the florist sector. Nathan owns, and is a director of, All Seasons Flowers Limited – a franchise business with eight florists in the Auckland area. All Seasons positions itself in the middle of the market – targeting consumers who want value-for-money flowers – and Nathan is keen to expand further down the country.

“Currently, many growers are approaching retirement or are based on land being sought by developers.”



Floral design doesn’t necessarily mean flowers – shown here a striking linear Stephens floral arrangement using ivy and bleached flax. Photo Vicky Broadbent.

The franchise uses several forms of advertising, including radio, newspapers and direct mail, and emphasises the health benefits of having flowers in the home or workplace.

“Research has shown that flowers have a positive impact on people’s lives and health. We want to make the public more aware about the



Unique use of berries in a ceramic vase
by Iain Stephens. Photo Susanna Burton.



Above Flowers with gifts is proving popular – shown here an antique cup and saucer with complementing flowers and a packet of shortbread, by Belle Vie.

Middle New Zealand lacks an abundance of native flowers so local florists have become used their talent to create stunning arrangements with grasses, flax and reeds. Arrangement by Belle Vie.

Right Innovative use of succulents and moss combine to create a simple yet stunning floral arrangement. Floral design by Belle Vie.

benefits of flowers." Offering reasonable prices is also important as flowers compete with a range of other potential gifts items.

Valentine's Day is the biggest event on the florist's calendar, closely followed by Mother's Day.

Nathan says belonging to a franchise can help to keep prices to consumers reasonable, due to the benefits of buying in larger volumes. "We have collective power on the purchasing side, and in buying other things like insurance or Yellow Pages advertisements."

The franchise offers a four-week business and floral training course to members – who also get to share the combined experience and knowledge of other franchisees.

ON-LINE SALES

Although most florists operate independently, the sector does have two strong collective groups in its

ordering and delivery agencies in Teleflora and Interflora.

Derek Hargreaves, Interflora's executive director, says that although overall growth in flower sales has been small but steady, over the last five years there has been a big jump in sales through Interflora's website.

"Typically growth in internet sales has been running at about 20–30 per cent a year. But, since the middle of last year, it has been in the order of 50–60 per cent."

The reason for the jump in internet sales was probably due to Interflora putting considerable effort into improving the site – which had been through several development phases and recently underwent usability testing and improvements.

The increase in sales suggests the improvements have worked; people are enjoying using the site, Hargreaves says. "Interflora has been in business for a long time. We used to send flowers by telegraph and the internet is just an extension of that. People have confidence in our brand and trust us to deliver."

Interflora, which operates as a co-operative owned by its florist members, has about 220 members in New Zealand. Internationally, the group operates in 150 countries, has 55,000 florists, and handles about 75 orders a minute – worth about \$2 billion a year.

Hargreaves says another growth area for Interflora has been people combining flowers with other gift items, such as soft toys, chocolates and wine. "More and more we are seeing people

combining flowers with other products. People really like being able to do this."

Award-winning florist Iain Stephens has also experienced growth in on-line orders. He says a lot of people still use the website for research and then call to place an order. "Many people like to talk about the order before making it."

WORLD CLASS

Stephens, who owns three florists' shops called Iain Stephens Floral Design, is



Bringing fun to flowers, FloraMax Flowers Work Wonders campaign – a quirky approach to encourage consumers to buy flowers even if it's not a special occasion.



Above All Seasons, one of the few franchise operations, positions itself in the middle of the market – targeting consumers who want value-for-money flowers.
Right Ceramic egg containing exotic orchids nestle in a man-made birds nest – created by Iain Stephens. Photo Vicky Broadbent.



a previous winner of the Interflora Florist of the Year and has represented New Zealand in the Interflora World Cup of floral design. He has won four gold medals at the Ellerslie Flower Show and has designed flowers for the likes of Elton John, the Queen Mother, Tina Turner and Bono.

The current trend in floral design is minimalistic – but lush.

Last year Stephens spent a sabbatical in France, where he worked with well-known floral firm Hervé Frezal. He has been invited to submit work for the international florist annual for the last two years – both submissions were accepted – plus has just featured as the main designer in the French magazine *Nacre*.

SEASONAL

With 17 years' experience in the business, Stephens says New Zealand's floral art is influenced by overseas trends and local factors. But the biggest influence on what's in stores is seasonal availability.

"For example, last winter was very wet so there weren't a lot of flowers about and people had to be more creative using branches and leaves."

"The current trend in floral design is stylised minimalistic – but lush", he says. "The trend from Europe is still quite minimalist, but softer than it was. This reflects what's happening in interior design. We're also using a lot of glass vases for arranging flowers, and more frames made from bamboo or wire."

New Zealand does have its own style in floral art, largely because our isolated location means florists must work with what they have to hand, he says. "In Europe you have unlimited access to any flower of any length at any time of year – so long as you are willing to pay for it." New Zealanders don't have that luxury and have to work with what is available.

Like Interflora, Stephens has increased sales of non-flower gift items. "Sales of gift baskets are growing by about 10–15 per cent. That's encouraged us to develop our own brand of gourmet products to include in the baskets."

One ongoing issue for his business is finding properly trained florists. "There may be more florist stores now than 10 years ago, but there are fewer professionally trained florists in those stores," he says. The difficulty of getting trained staff has meant that some of his staff are people from overseas.

INFLUENCES

Interflora director and florist Ruth Winter says flower designs in New Zealand are

influenced by a mixture of overseas trends – what consumers see in magazines and on television, and interior decorating colours.

But there is also a home-grown Pacific look mixed into the overseas trends. For example, flaxes are very popular here, along with native branches and mosses.

Increasingly, florists are using water-filled containers when they prepare arrangements – which works well because it means the flowers were



Another tongue-in-cheek poster from FloraMax.



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Iain Stephens. Photo Nacre

Kiwi florists source their foliage from the most unexpected places. Iain Stephens beach combs for interesting pieces. Photo Susanna Burton.

delivered in the same perfect condition they were in when they left the store, she says.

STYLE

Tanya Northcott, owner of Queenstown's Renaissance Florist, says it is important for florists to develop a recognisable and reliable style to stand out from the competition. "Each florist who works here brings their own style; but I do modify it a bit to make sure it works with the Renaissance style."

Northcott says that when she opened the store in Queenstown eight years ago there were only two florists in the town. Now there are many more stores, and flowers are also sold at supermarkets and service stations – not to mention over the internet. "Competition has increased over the years so you have to offer something different – you have to have a bit of 'wow' or you will be left behind."

Like many florists, her day-to-day sales to individuals and businesses are boosted by special events throughout the year that traditionally drive flower sales. Valentine's Day is the biggest event on the florist's calendar, closely followed by Mother's Day. Christmas is also important, as is the wedding season.

"I get a lot of brides from overseas who find me through my website. A lot of tourists come to Queenstown to marry, and it seems to be particularly popular with Japanese brides."

Generally, florists are well-supplied with flowers and florists' supplies, she says. "That side of the business is reasonably competitive and well organised."

WHOLESALE

Ross Beaumont, managing director of independent flower wholesaler Downies, says most flowers are sold to retailers through flower auctions or wholesalers. There are also several importers of both flowers and foliage. Christchurch-based Downies, which claims to be the first independent flower wholesaler, also offers a range of floral accessories.

Since the business began in 1968, there has been huge growth in the number of florists operating, Beaumont says. "When I first started there were probably about 25 florists in Christchurch. Now there would be 80 to 100." The supply side of the business has also grown and is quite competitive – with at least three auction houses selling flowers, along with at least six importers of florists' supplies.

The infrastructure, availability and floral design talent is in place. It would seem all that remains is for Kiwis to move away from flowers 'just for special occasions' and include them in their day-to-day living. ■

By **Frances Martin**, a freelance writer based in Paremata and a regular contributor to *NZRetail*.