

Flower growing in Kenya

Kenya's flower industry is the oldest and largest in Africa. The industry has grown to become the biggest exporter of roses and carnation flowers in the world. In 2003 sales of flowers was worth £77million, which was 8% of Kenya's export earnings.



Kenya is the world's leading exporter of roses

Kenya has some of the largest flower farms in the world, employing up to 10,000 workers. They usually live on the farm where they work. Approximately 65% of Kenyan flower workers are employed as casual workers. This means that they are not entitled to benefits and can be fired at any time. Women workers are likely to lose their jobs if they become pregnant. Many workers are paid wages of just £1 a day. The flowers are grown mostly around the Rift Valley lakes, which supply water for the farms.



Millions of flowers are flown from Nairobi to Europe every year. The peak period for export is in early February around Valentine's Day.

Irene Mwai's works in a flower farm in Kericho in the Highlands of Kenya. Because of the favourable climate, an increasing number of flowers are cultivated here – especially roses.

By 9am, on a February morning, Irene has already been in the farm for two hours and has cut 2,000 roses. She wears leather gloves reaching up to her elbows; "protection against thorns" she says. When she does the harvesting, she cuts the stems and shoves them skilfully under her left hand.

"It is always like this just before Valentine Day", says the 32 year-old, even though the popular "Lovers Day" is not celebrated in rural Kenya in the way it is in the USA and Europe. The farm Irene works on earns 20% of its year's income in the ten days running up to Valentines Day.



Most flowers in Kenya are grown in large greenhouses

Even though Kenya has a good climate for flower growing, most flowers are grown in greenhouses to protect them from rain, wind or hail storms that reach the highlands in the rainy season from April to July. "Wet roses rot easily" says Irene.

After harvesting, the freshly cut roses are placed in buckets of water and chemicals to protect the roses against germs and diseases and to prevent them from drooping after harvest.

Men workers wearing red protective clothing and gas masks spray the flowerbeds regularly with chemicals to prevent germs and diseases.

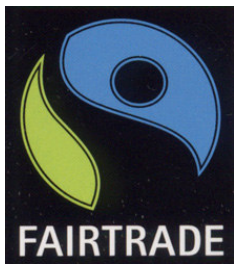
Large foreign companies and white Kenyan farmers own almost 90% of all the flower farms. Asian Kenyans own the rest. Although Kenya sells a lot of flowers, most of the money goes to the foreign companies that own the farms.

Out of the 150 flower farms in Kenya, there are seventeen that have improved the working conditions for their workers. These seventeen are members of the **Kenya Flower Council (KFC)**, which is trying to make a **Fairtrade code of practice** become law in Kenya's flower industry. These farms produce 60% of the flowers in Kenya. This code of practice would mean better working conditions for the workers and better protection of the environment.

The KFC Fairtrade code includes:

- Farms using chemicals that are environmentally friendly
- Computerised drip-irrigation system to reduce water wastage
- The wearing of protective clothing by farmers
- Fair wages, with workers paid above the government minimum wage of 2000 Kenyan Shillings (£28 a month)
- Six day working week of 46 hours
- Overtime pay
- Twenty one days paid holidays a year
- Two months paid maternity leave
- One month paid sick leave
- Reasonable housing

The code has been supported by many people, but there are problems with making sure that it happens. For example, the people carrying out the inspections on the farms to make sure the code is being followed are paid for by the foreign flower companies themselves. KFC say that these inspectors should be independent so that they are better able to criticise the companies if necessary. The first fairtrade roses from Kenya went on sale in the UK in February 2004 in Tesco. They were in two different size bouquets, retailing at £4.99 and £7.99. The sale of Fairtrade roses at such prices will go towards meeting the KFC Fairtrade code.



The Fairtrade mark

A third of all flowers from Kenya are exported to the UK. Large stores such as Marks and Spencer, Asda, Safeway-Morrison and Tesco all sell Kenyan cut flowers.

However, all is not well in Kenya's flower gardens. The flower industry is being blamed by many for falling water levels in the Rift Valley Lakes. It has been suggested that if things don't change, these lakes could disappear altogether.

This is why the KFC code calls for the use of computerised irrigation by all flower farmers to save water. There is also a worry about the fertilisers and pesticides (chemicals) being used by the flower growers. It is feared that some of these chemicals are leaking into the water table to pollute underground water, lakes and springs.

Web links for further information:**BBC Country Profiles: Kenya**

A brief history and key statistics: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/country_profiles/1024563.stm

BBC report: Kenya's Flower power

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/africa/1260248.stm

BBC News World Edition

Top news stories from across Africa <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/default.stm>

All Africa

A site offering news from over one hundred newspapers and news agencies across Africa.

Kenya pages: <http://allafrica.com/kenya/>

One World Africa

The African arm of the One World independent media network; a network of people and groups working for human rights and sustainable development.

<http://africa.oneworld.net/article/frontpage/151/509>

Kenya country guide: <http://africa.oneworld.net/article/archive/4890/>

UNDP Human Development Reports

Human development indicators, searchable by country or indicators.

<http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/>