

I'm interested in exporting flowers from Australia – what do I need to know?

Getting involved in exporting can be a good source of income if done correctly, but it involves greater risks and costs than supplying flowers to the domestic market.

Preparing and packing fresh cut flowers for export is highly specialised, as flowers are perishable and fragile. The typical export path may take up to 7 days between flowers leaving the farm and reaching the end customer. The flowers must be kept as cool as possible throughout the trip to maintain their quality. Not all flowers are suitable for export. Some may not have a long enough vase life or be too fragile to ship. Certain flowers are prohibited from entry into certain markets, due to quarantine concerns, e.g. flowers from the plant family Rutaceae cannot be exported to the US.

Flower exports from Australia form a very small part of the world flower trade, and are primarily native Australian and South African flowers and foliage. In contrast to Australia, many of the countries with a large export flower industry have lower labour costs and abundant labour, and a more favourable exchange rate. Many are close to major markets, and enjoy subsidised air freight, and preferential tariffs and other duties. To be competitive, Australian growers and exporters must be committed to quality and service.

Do you want to source flowers to export? Do you want to contract growers to supply these flowers to you? Have you had prior experience in exporting fresh flowers?

Australian native flowers and South African flowers are grown by WFA members and other growers throughout Australia, and many of these growers have experience in sending flowers through an exporter. If you want to do business with them, they like to know about prices, volumes, payment arrangements and also your procedures to ensure their flowers are well looked after once they reach the overseas market to ensure they are well presented to buyers. Growers will decide whether the returns you can offer them, and the terms of payment, are better than what they can get from their present markets, and whether the risks are acceptable (exporting something as perishable as flowers is higher risk than selling on domestic markets). Some growers do their own exporting, although scale comes into consideration as freight rates vary considerably according to tonnage, so it can be cheaper to send through an exporter despite their fees.

While not wanting to downplay the possible market opportunities for Australian growers and their products, you may find that the cost of sending flowers from Australia is higher than the cost of sourcing them from growers elsewhere, e.g. closer to your target market. The cost is determined by what the growers charge per bunch or stem, plus cost of packaging and sending to the freight forwarder, plus the cost of airfreight to your target market country and any inspection fees either in Australia or at the destination.

Or, are you planning to grow the flowers yourself for the export market?

Growing for export requires careful planning based on thorough market research and an export marketing plan. You are advised to learn how to grow and sell flowers successfully on the domestic market before venturing into export.

Critical for success is that you grow the right species or varieties, and can match harvesting periods to demand. Many wildflowers will not yield marketable quantities until the plants are over 3 years old. Find out more about getting into growing wildflowers commercially by reading 'Getting into wildflower growing – things you should know' on this website.

Only export top-quality product – the ‘Quality Specifications for Australian Wildflowers’ are available to assist you with advice on the best stage to pick the flowers, how to focus on quality and what specific handling requirements for the major flower products are.

Only a few growers are large enough in scale to be able to meet demand on their own. Most growers work with specialist flower exporters, or deal directly with an overseas buyer via an Australian based freight forwarder. A more recent development has been the formation of grower co-ops that allow several smaller producers to market their product together and thereby gain more power in the marketplace.

Market opportunities and requirements

Whether you are growing the flowers yourself, or sourcing them from growers, you will need to find out all you can about the market opportunities and requirements in the country/countries to which you want to export. Focus on the prices people there want to pay and the quantities they would like each week (or how often they require a shipment). What other requirements do they have?

You also need to find out about air freight availability to your proposed market and its cost – from a freight forwarder. Importantly, how long is the trip between the freight forwarder and the overseas buyer?

Many flowers are seasonal and not available all year round. The booklet ‘*Flowers from Australia*’, available from WFA, gives an indication of the extensive product range available and seasons of availability.

Some flowers are more suited to long distance shipping than others, so you will need to check whether the flowers your target market wants to import are in this category. And some flowers are more economical to ship than others – due to the size of flower boxes and how many stems or bunches will fit per box. Freight is calculated on the basis of the box dimensions. However, you can’t jam too many flowers into a box or they get damaged.

The Australian Government requires that growers and exporters have permits to export certain native flower products. Go to www.environment.gov.au (look under ‘Import and export of wildlife’).

For all exported products, you will also need phytosanitary certification and inspection for specified markets from the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service plus Australian Customs clearances. You must also understand import duties and tariffs, and customs clearance in the country of destination. For more about exporting, see www.daff.gov.au/aqis/export.

Sources of export assistance

Your state government department of trade and/or regional development may provide information and counselling to businesses aiming to enter export markets.

Austrade (the Australian Trade Commission) also provides information on getting started as an exporter, and regularly prepares profiles on industries and countries (see www.austrade.gov.au). Austrade offers advice, training and assistance such as the Export Market Development Grants scheme.

Links to more information:

Interactive guides produced by the Centre for Native Floriculture:

For wildflower growers: (www.uq.edu.au/lcafs/cnf): I Think I Want to Grow Native Flowers.

Postharvest care of flowers:

(www.uq.edu.au/lcafs/cnf): Why Do Good Flowers Go Bad?

New book available soon:

Bettina Gollnow (2013): Getting started in wildflower growing -

How to grow native Australian and South African species for the cut flower market

First edition

Being published by RIRDC

WildFlowers Australia Ltd. 2010. Growing proteas for the cut flower market. Cost \$30. To order a copy, please contact secretariat@wildflowersaustralia.com.au