

Chapter 5

Flowers in Spring and Winter

The first sendings of daffodils as cut flowers by J.T. White to Covent Garden market in orange boxes demonstrated that there was a ready sale for flowers at the wholesale markets of our large cities. Very quickly wholesalers at city markets were accepting larger quantities of cut flowers and soon produced wooden returnable boxes branded with the merchant's name which went daily from nursery, to market, to retailer and back again.

The bulk of this traffic went by rail to every major market in England, Wales and Scotland with delivery completed overnight even including transshipment on to other lines through London. Flowers were picked up at most branch line stations in the growing areas and at peak periods Spalding station was handling many thousands of boxes of fresh flowers nightly.

Before the 1939 war, road transport had begun to handle flowers often as additional cargo with, or even on top of, loads of vegetables and potatoes.

After 1945 flower growers were able to turn slowly back from food production and the competition between road and rail transport became sharper. Road hauliers were able to offer collection from farm and delivery to market overnight to most major markets. The rail service continued to provide overnight delivery and had the advantage initially of a better network serving many smaller townships not covered by the road hauliers. However, rail services began to decline long before the Beeching cuts trimmed off branch lines and local station facilities. A few attempts were made to palletise consignments but the service was not modernised and by the 1950's road transport operatives in keen competition with each other had gradually taken over the haulage of flowers and perishable produce.

Now the change is irreversible. Not only is the early morning delivery at markets achievable only by lorry service, but also the introduction of

temperature controlled trailers enables flowers, fresh fruit and vegetables to be delivered long distances in good condition. In fact in 1983 it is a prerequisite of at least one supermarket chain that all fresh foodstuffs and flowers will be delivered to their distribution depots under strictly controlled temperatures.

The large and cumbersome returnable boxes were often a nuisance, involving a considerable logistic problem for little satisfaction and at a high cost to the wholesaling merchant. He could never get his boxes back from his customers and delivered to the producers in the right numbers and his warehousing charges in the inner city areas were considerable.

The change over to cardboard non-returnables solved many of the wholesalers' problems. It helped with the changeover to road transport because uneconomic and time consuming back loads of empties became a thing of the past.

So far as the producer was concerned he now had to pay for the container and was that much worse off — in fact in times of glut and no sale he lost the cost of both box and flowers. On the other hand he did become more flexible in his marketing and could consign to any salesman in the country rather than be tied to the owner of the boxes for sales.

In the 1920's enterprising nurserymen discovered that the demand for flowers was greater in times of shortage during the winter months. They soon found that both daffodils and tulips would force very well in greenhouses during January and February and by manipulating the development of the flower inside the bulb, flowers could be produced before Christmas. The forcing of winter flowers increased into a sizeable business before 1939.

Bulbs were lifted, temperature treated and planted in four inches of soil in wooden trays in September and October. The trays were well watered and plunged under straw on a standing ground before being brought into heated greenhouses in successional batches. This business became the mainstay of the major flower growers because the prices obtained for the outdoor bloom could drop to zero during periods of glut when larger acreages began to be grown.

This work was very labour intensive. Bulbs were individually planted. The boxes had to be manhandled several times — onto the standing ground, into the glasshouses and out again. Every flower had to be individually picked and bunched. Since the larger growers were forcing hundreds of tons of daffodils and millions of tulips, this work provided employment for literally thousands of men and women; a lot of this employment coming neatly at a fairly slack time of year when outside employment was at a standstill.

For fifty years every flower was marketed fully developed. Both tulips

and daffodils were picked fully open and from the greenhouses every bunch was carefully tied on a frame in staged bunches with every head facing one way. This was a very tedious process which could rarely be mechanised sufficiently because the positioning of flowers and foliage had to be done individually and as many bunchers were required as pickers supplying them.

In the early 1960's a great change in flower handling was introduced almost single handed by Carlo Naef of J. & E. Page of Covent Garden. He was convinced that flowers would be better handled in bud. He had trial batches picked in tight bud and persuaded his customers to take and sell them still in bud. For a while there was reluctance and a few buyers fought shy.

However, gradually the sense of this won through and within a year or two other salesmen followed suit. The bud pack does not make a good display on the salesman's stand or in the shop but the advantages outweighed this. The flowers travelled better without damage. The retailer had a longer shelf life and the customer gained a longer vase life. Even the grower found that more bunches could be packed in a box, reducing transport costs and the time consuming task of framing staggered bunches was cut out. Staged bunches of buds do not make a display pack so bud bunching was done direct from the bed and labour costs were halved.

Today the production of fresh "young" flowers in bud is essential at the beginning of the marketing chain. For export to the continent buyers demand daffodils in straight "pencil" form with the flower developed in the green bud but with not a trace of colour showing.

For the home market a split calyx is preferred and most growers feel happier producing a more fully developed flower, at least goose necked or even at the point of bursting to make sure that every bloom will expand to its full potential in the vase. The trumpet varieties will all develop flowers from straight pencils but there are a few varieties of narcissi which could fail to develop properly if cut too early.

The demand for green bud is a little more difficult to satisfy in tulips. The trade, salesmen and retailers, want tulips delivered to them in a green stage so that they have maximum shelf life. But every tulip variety behaves differently and if cut too green the flower colour fails to develop properly.

This is one of the dilemmas facing the tulip grower because a few hours of warm weather can change closed buds to open flowers overnight in transit. The large acreage of Darwin hybrids had also led buyers to look for a large bud on tulip cut flowers. Many beautiful varieties of Mendel and Triumph tulips have a comparatively small bud which



A family business. O.A. Taylor and family in the early days.

develops into a better vase flower than the hybrids but have a poor sale because they do not look attractive at the bud stage.

Forcing practices have changed little over the years. More sophisticated temperature control is possible in preparing the bulbs for early forcing and for controlling growth for later rounds. This is easier to achieve because movement of batches of dry bulbs or planted boxes can be done by palletisation into storage chambers, cold stores and even into the greenhouses. The sandy silt soil used for planting in the forcing boxes has largely been replaced by peat which is lighter to handle and easier to remove after forcing.

Greenhouse design has changed from brick and timber "aeroplane" style structures as they were called, to lighter dutch light, venlo, cheaper structures and to maintenance-free aluminium houses. Since bulb forcing of tulips and daffodils require less light than other crops, some growers are forcing in insulated buildings with roof lights and supplementary electric lighting.

The relative economies of coal and oil heating systems have varied over the decades but the greatest change in the last twenty years has been the substitution of warm air heating in place of hot water piping.

Forcing under plastic skin houses has been largely abandoned because the investment and equipment merits a more substantial cover. Direct planting in beds to be covered by mobile glasshouses is still practised.

A method of preparing and holding the dry bulb in cold store before planting direct into border soil for tulip forcing is known as "5°" C forcing (or 5 degree forcing). It is not much used now because the same bulbs planted in boxes can be put through more quickly in a planned forcing programme.

Forcers with ample cold storage now use chambers to hold pallets of planting boxes for later rounds in controlled growth by "double cooling" instead of plunging beds.