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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Pick Your Poison

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WHEN I send a bouquet to my mother on the second Sunday in May, I'm motivated by this familiar scene from childhood: Mom walking in the door at the end of the day, paperwork spilling out of her briefcase, her feet aching to get out of high-heeled shoes and her mind already turning to what she could cook for dinner. She worked a series of difficult jobs that she didn't particularly like to help keep food on the table. For that, she gets flowers.

This annual floral tradition — one that I participate in along with roughly half of all Mother's Day shoppers, bringing in about \$1.98 billion to American flower shops — was fairly uncomplicated until I started wondering about the women who might harvest those flowers. The question of where and how our flowers are grown raises all sorts of thorny issues for consumers. But today I've sent my mother a bouquet that doesn't come at the expense of someone else's mother, working under much worse conditions and for much less pay.

Of the roughly four billion stems we buy each year, 78 percent are imported, mostly from Latin America. One impetus for moving cut flower production to countries like Colombia and allowing the flowers to be shipped to the United States tariff-free was a misguided hope that such projects would provide an alternative to coca production.

While the drug war rages on, serious labor and environmental problems associated with floriculture have now moved south of the border. Imported flowers can't show any signs of bugs and fungus when they arrive at Miami International Airport for inspection. In their eagerness to make sure that their flowers pass muster, many growers in Latin America douse their crops in agricultural chemicals that are banned or severely restricted here at home.

On a flower farm in Ecuador, I saw workers dunk bunches of roses, blossom-first, into a barrel of fungicide just before shipment. The stench was so overpowering that I had to resist the urge to run outside for air. Chemicals dripped off the flowers, they sloshed on the floor and it seemed impossible that the workers — almost all women — could get through the day without getting covered in them, too.

In addition to the health hazards that such chemicals pose, the runoff of pesticides and fertilizers into streams and aquifers threatens already fragile water resources. This has prompted agencies like Canada's International Development Research Center to invest in long-term projects to study the extent to which these chemicals persist in the

environment. All this for a flower? When I watched Ecuadorean workers move through a field of baby's breath — a filler that is nothing but an afterthought in most arrangements — dressed in full protective gear to shield themselves from chemicals, I realized that something had gone horribly wrong with the Mother's Day bouquet. I couldn't stomach the idea of buying those flowers for my mom. But until recently, there weren't many alternatives.

One is the new VeriFlora label, which establishes sustainable agriculture and labor standards for flowers grown anywhere in the world for sale in the United States. Two farms in California and two in Latin America have been certified so far, representing about 250 million stems per year that enlightened consumers can send their mothers. Some of those flowers are organic, and others are grown using the least toxic methods available with a commitment to move to organic practices eventually. All growers are monitored for compliance with local labor laws.

So where are these eco-label flowers? Good question. I've asked dozens of florists why they don't offer organic or certified flowers, and every one of them told me that their customers haven't asked for them. Some didn't want to call the rest of their flowers into question by offering socially responsible bouquets as well. But organic and conventional products are sold side by side in grocery stores; there's no reason flowers should be different.

It's a vicious cycle. Growers won't participate in the program unless they see a market for certified flowers. Retailers won't stock them unless their customers demand them.

And although shoppers might prefer "green" bouquets if they saw them, they can hardly be blamed for not asking for them.

Try this experiment: Call your florist and say that you'd like a dozen pesticide-free roses delivered to your mother. Explain that you also want an assurance that the woman who picked them wasn't forced to work unpaid overtime or take her children to work to help her meet her quotas.

Silence? Yeah, that's the response my florist gave, too. But my mother didn't raise a shrinking violet. I said that I would find certified flowers somewhere, and eventually I did. Mom, your roses are coming from an Internet florist that sells only organic bouquets. I don't know what the woman who picked them will do with her day off, but at least I know that she gets a day off. I wish a happy Mother's Day to both of you.

Amy Stewart is the author of the forthcoming "Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers."