

Potted roses on retail shelves that are a feast for the senses. Launching at different European supermarkets is the distinctly Dolc' Amore® brand combining - amongst others - superior genetics from Danish rose breeder Rosa Eskelund Roses Forever and the quality, trust, and reliability from flowering plant grower Pligt Professionals from Heinenoord, the Netherlands. The ultimate goal is to create brand loyalty and to capture repeat customers.



Persuasive Petals

Flowering pot plant grower Gert van der Pligt is open and honest about it. Wandering through the produce department of a local supermarket would often lead to feelings of envy. The finest, neatly labeled and branded selection of produce, a well-thought out floorplan and proper lighting always seemed to automatically lure in customers, while the flower shop, often located in a windy area near the exit of the store was not something to entice customers, to say the least. Back in his greenhouse, he rolled up his sleeves and started to develop a differentiation strategy that would be key to his competitive advantage.

Fully automated business

Pligt Professionals ranks among one of the most impressive flowering pot plant growers in the Netherlands serving predominantly big-box retailers. When Gert bought the business from his father and uncle in 2000, he saw great oppor-

tunities to drive potted plant sales by providing higher levels of quality at store level. As such, the decision was taken to fully automate the business, fitting it with state-of-the-art technology: rolling bench system, artificial lighting, central pathway, co-generation plant and camera sorting technology and intelligent order picking systems. "Looking back on the past ten years, overall business has been going well. Every two years marked big steps in business development. In 2003 and 2006, Pligt Professionals modernized and expanded its greenhouse area in Heinenoord from 16,000m² to 4ha. Two years later, the acquisition of a relatively new greenhouse complex in 's-Gravenzande enabled us to add another 4ha of ultra-modern greenhouse area. Today we take pride in being Europe's largest grower of potted indoor Begonias, producing 250,000 plants per week. Additionally we grow Campanula, potted Chrysanthemums, Poinsettia, Princettia, Gentiana, Cyclamen

and more recently potted miniature roses. Our annual production currently stands in excess of 10 million plants, one million of which are potted roses. Of course we had our fair share of peaks and valleys in the market, but in general one can say the market demand has been growing and that we succeeded in being better connected to the end consumer: female shoppers, 30 years or older, open-minded and willing to try new products."

Surprise and delight

Surveys indicate that of the 30% of retail shoppers trying new products, roughly 33% notice the brand packaging and sales display. With this in mind, Gert knew that one of the biggest challenges for the future lied in consumer appeal and plant position on the retail shelf. As such he teamed up with expert plant marketers, unraveling the language of a demand-driven supply chain.

by Ron van der Ploeg

“Ten years ago we changed our strategy, thoroughly analysing the demand to pick up the latest signals and shape the demand by launching promotional strategies, product branding and typically seasonal crops. Today, our production divides the year into four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter with two or three new plant releases each quarter. We are always working to surprise and delight our customers to provide them each month with premium quality plants backed by innovative and consistent marketing and branding.”

Dolce'Amore®

The year 2014 marked the launch of the consumer brand Dolce'Amore. Pligt emphasises that this is not just another word for a new logo. “We conducted extensive market research by partnering with experts and developed a shop-in-shop area to sell potted plants in the famous Dutch department store Bijenkorf. We did some test marketing of several plants for the high end market. The most important thing we learned was that at retail a brand has five seconds to capture a consumer's attention. And that besides the right quality crop at the right moment, the overall quality of the market introduction, including packaging, appeal, consumer website, POP material, art work and irresistible displays are all equally important. Subsequently, we established a new company Flower Design & Services which grants Dolce'Amore licenses to Dutch growers. Currently, ten growers are using the brand, but we also source ornamentals from outside to sell them under the Dolce'Amore label. So the brand also includes a little bit of trading to complete the product portfolio. We work, for example, with a flower factory which provides us with mixed bouquets designed by top notch florists. Basically we returned to our reason for being; helping consumers create their dream home by

providing them a home décor item with truly added value. For too long the business has been ruled by cost price and price promotions.”

Revolutionary Infinity roses

Dolce'Amore includes fresh cut flowers, potted plants but also seasonal arrangements, waxed bulbs and home décor items. Gert soon realised that to make shoppers dream, the premium brand couldn't possibly do without the most romantic of potted plants, roses.

In 2011, he met Rosa Eskelund, the dynamic rose breeder from Denmark with whom he immediately shared the brand vision and its values. From the outset he was blown away by Eskelund's revolutionary line of potted Infinity roses.

Pondering over the 40,000 different items an average supermarket carries, the difficulties to stand out from the crowd, the persistence it requires to convince supermarket chains to give up floor space to private flower and plant labels, he said, “We are always keen for specialties and when Rosa presented her line of miniature roses we immediately understood that these seamlessly fitted our 'surprise-and-delight' sales strategy with premium quality and drop dead gorgeous looks leaving long lasting impressions at the consumer level.”

The company opted for the Infinity rose, in white and pink. “Recently we have added dark pink and soft pink, while yellow and red ones are being tested. Infinity roses clearly have the blood of garden roses and this explains their much more natural look when compared to standard miniature roses. They also bear extremely large blooms (up to 8 cm diameter) which rise above sturdy stems with beautifully contrasting lush green foliage. We are definitely not looking at the big masses but always try to look through the eyes of a consumer.

In Rosa Eskelund, Pligt has found a breeder who is willing to go the

extra mile for her customers, create demand and push sales. “She's an absolute expert in creating roses that provide media coverage, having her finest hour when the light pink Infinity rose was named by HRH Crown Princess Mary of Denmark. Rosa provides her customers with the right tools to help them be more successful,” Gert said.

Growing a high profile crop

Growing a high profile crop such as potted Infinity roses (in 9cm and 14cm pot sizes) comes with necessary adjustments in the greenhouse. The rolling bench system was already in place, but apart from that many changes were needed. “In potted roses we increased our light levels from 4,500 to 11,000 lux, we invested in a new shearing machine and expanded our greenhouse area from four to nine sections. The change in growing conditions was impressive, switching the temperature from 20°C in Begonia to 24°C in potted roses and from 16 hours darkness in Poinsettia to 20 hours light during the rooting phase of

Dolce'Amore Shop-in-shop store





potted roses.”

At Pligt Professionals miniature rose growing is broken into five steps, with the entire cycle taking ten weeks.

Phase one is propagating by stem cuttings. Dipped into hormone rooting powder four cuttings and six cuttings are placed into a 9cm and 14cm pot respectively.

To achieve the best rooting results of the pre-cooled cuttings, Gert covers the newly stuck roses with a plastic sheet punched in combination with acrylic sheet covering. The temperature within the rooting area is 24°C while the crop is lighted 20 hours/day with maximum light levels of 11,000 lux. From April to August the greenhouse roof is covered with white wash to avoid leaf burn. In case of intensive sunlight shade curtains can be closed.

Most of the time the company is self-sufficient in cuttings. “But when setting up a production of a new variety, cuttings are sourced from Eskelund in Denmark. ‘Mumming up’ is a job that requires precision as cuttings need to

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be carefully sorted by colour.”

The second phase starts after two weeks when the plastic can be removed and plants are moved to the growing area with full light and temperatures varying from 22°C to 23°C.

In two weeks the plants are ready for step three, the first pruning carried out by an automatic pruning shear. Cuttings are placed into crates and stored in a cooler at 3°C for a maximum of four to five day after which they are cut into four or five smaller cuttings.”

After shearing plants are kept ten days in full light to enable the formation of new shoots. What follows is step four: spacing of the plants. “Plants are spaced once, growing 100 plants per m² per year and some manual clipping carried out when necessary.”

PGR's

In miniature rose growing some varieties will tend to stretch more than others but the grower will always need to apply plant growth regulators. “We use bonzi, but

are running a test with mechanical conditioning: a spray boom clad with plastic foil overhead rubbing the crop and thus causing reduced plant growth. We are also testing the auxiliary adjuvant Elasto, which increases the effectiveness of PGR. The results in Poinsettia are good and we are now rolling this out in miniature roses where we believe it can lead to a 30% decrease in the use of PGR's.”

Crop support from Denmark

In the meantime Pligt Professionals has earned a reputation with its premium quality Dolc'Amore miniature roses and Amorosa Line for wholesale sales. When asked about the challenges that are still to overcome, Gert says that good rooting and top quality production go hand in hand. The rooting phase is extremely energy demanding. When producing light with the help of our co-generation plant it can happen that the storage tank is full of heat which can result in two hours less light for the crop. And that's what we have to prevent,” said Gert, who is happy to rely on crop support from Denmark. “Three times a year we visit Eskelund's company in Denmark to go through the entire cropping process. In turn their crop engineers come to Holland to exchange ideas and research findings. Rosa also plays an important intermediary role in bringing us growers in contact with industry peers in Norway.”

The right potting soil mix is also key. “And even filling of pots is an important detail; if the soil is not pressed enough plants can have difficulties starting off and developing strong stems. All in all, crop times are short (9 to 12 weeks) so everything has to be precise from the beginning until the end.” Gert has tested several potting soil mixes, including a mix from Denmark. “We found out accidentally that Begonia soil makes perfect rooting soil for miniature roses too. Eventually we settled on a recipe including a mix of rose soil and general begonia soil ingredients.

This provides an airy and open structure and makes the plants more resistant to botrytis. It is equally important to have pH (5.5) and EC (a reading of 1.10)."

Gert said he finds pleasure in working with the Danes. "We have been working together for many, many years in Campanula, Aster and Gentiana. We know the people, and understand the way they think. There's a mutual trust. Equally important is the fact that our Danish supplier continues her breeding work, creating new varieties."

Future

Gert believes that even on supermarket shelves his plant can create a wow effect and boost flower and plant sales. "When we produce for Ikea or Morrisons little branding is needed as these stores already make their plants stand out from the crowd. But when some retailer or flower shop prefers to make the difference then we produce Dolc'Amore plants. The bigger the retailer, the more difficult it is to introduce a private label. Although even the big box stores are now beginning to understand that 30 to 40% of sold flowers are used as a gift and that the presentation and quality of flowers on the supermarket floor needs to be improved in terms of positioning themselves as a retailer of floral gifts. The marketing formula is under testing and further development at some franchises of AH, Jumbo and Plus. Most important is that we can show grocery stores that selling flowers really can be fun and even profitable. Branding pot plants is nice but intensive, before you know it you've visited flower shops three to four times a week."

Gert concludes that through the collaboration with his customers, developing attractive store displays, a beautiful product can create a blooming future for consumers, supply chain partners and growers alike. "Dolc'Amore is just the beginning." ■■■



Trend spotting

I took this shot at one of the past editions of Plantarium. I take pictures of what I see simply to help me later process the huge volume of industry information that's on show at events like this. Labels, displays, new technologies, marketing concepts and the plants themselves are all on show with many willing exhibitors at hand to offer detailed information about each.

I don't think that anyone who takes part in a trade show could possibly return to their hotel room without sore feet and a head much too full of information. But trade shows are one of the ways we all pick up on trends, and as we know, trends support and feed our business decisions. In recent months, I've noticed these emerging trends, some of which you may have also spotted...

Spray-free plants: in other words, choosing to use plants that need less or no spraying with fungicides or pesticides to keep them healthy and looking good. There's no arguing against it: from an environmental, occupational health, and basic cost reduction viewpoint it makes sense. Natural systems are less affected, fewer people come into contact with chemicals, and part of the budget can now be allocated elsewhere. The interesting thing is, where you might assume spray-free plants are less appealing than their fussier cousins, it's not actually so. There are plenty of gorgeous easy-care plants out there and they've suddenly become hotter property.

Being water wise: and by this I mean getting your head around valuing water without being anxious about it. Depending on where in the world you operate, there's a good chance you've had to focus more attention on water at some point in the past year or so, especially if you've had too little of it. We embrace those plants which use water efficiently to produce the results demanded of them.

Colour: this trend is interesting and in some ways could probably be termed perennial because it has been around for quite a while. If you look back you'll see that in tough economic times, the colour palette for plants tends to be subdued. When the market recovers, the hues become more saturated. It's a litmus test if you like, and crude as it appears to be, it's a good rough guide for what's coming next. Europe and the North Americas are beginning to enjoy economic recovery so expect some gorgeous colour in those markets.

No hyperbole: that's right, everyone's sick of false claims. I've noticed this trend steadily build, industry-wide, right through to the end users. We are becoming skeptical of enhanced or false claims. We want simplicity, surety and certainty. Overstated claims may look good in promotional and marketing materials but when the disease free rose ends up being a black-spot magnet, we lose trust.



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