



SAY IT WITH FLOWERS: A “Dutch auction” starts with a high price that drops until someone bids. In the 1630s, the Dutch expression *in het ootje*, or “in the small o,” referred to a different auction method but now is slang for “pulling one’s leg.” On average, a FloraHolland auction lasts 4 seconds.



Israel

Flower Power

PERHAPS NOT SINCE the garden of Eden’s apple tree has one plant held so much sway over a people’s destiny. The tulip’s arrival in the Netherlands in 1593 led not only to the iconic crayon-colored stripes of flowers that now decorate the Dutch landscape, but also to a national obsession that created a boom, a bust, and a centuries-long dominance of the global flower trade.

Native to central Asia, the tulip was introduced to the Netherlands just as international trade was making the country very, very rich. With its intensely saturated color, the tulip soon became a must-have addition to the gardens of the new merchant class. The craze quickly trickled down through Dutch society, and prices for tulip bulbs kept rising. In 1624, a tulip fancier offered 3,000 guilders—roughly the annual income of a wealthy merchant—for one bulb of the red-and-white-striped ‘Semper Augustus’, the rarest variety grown in that era. Rare bulbs like this were usually traded directly between growers and buyers. By 1630, a new industry of professional flower traders, called “florists,” had emerged, auctioning less valuable bulbs in the back rooms of taverns.

At the height of tulipmania, many florists bought bulbs on credit and immediately sold them at a profit. A

pound of Switsers, a common variety, sold for 120 guilders on January 15, 1637, and for 1,400 guilders just two weeks later. But in February, the entire tulip market came to a halt. No one was buying. Many florists, rich on paper, went bankrupt.

The sudden, spectacular crash piqued the interest of the rest of Europe. They simply had to see—and own—the flower that caused so much trouble, and the Dutch happily obliged, exporting domestic tulip bulbs to Europe and North America. As the flower trade expanded around the globe, Dutch growers expanded their offerings, cultivating hyacinths, roses, and other flowers. In 1911, a group of growers in Aalsmeer banded together and held the first organized flower auction in a local café.

Today, the Aalsmeer auction, at nearly 309 acres, is the largest of six auctions run by FloraHolland, which controls 98 percent of the Netherlands’ flower trade. Half the flowers sold in the world pass through the country, and most of the 45 million stems traded every day through FloraHolland are domestically grown. Imports make up about 16 percent of sales. (Less than 2 percent of the flowers sold go to the United States.) Perhaps in a nod to the bubble that started it all, transactions must be paid for by the end of the day. There is no credit. ▀

FLORAHOLLAND'S IMPORT SOURCES

COUNTRY	SALES	PERCENT
Kenya	\$375,480,000	37.8%
Israel	\$131,120,000	13.2%
Ethiopia	\$122,180,000	12.3%
Ecuador	\$64,070,000	6.4%
Germany	\$55,130,000	5.5%
Other countries	\$245,850,000	24.7%
TOTAL:	\$993,830,000	100.0%

FLORAHOLLAND'S EXPORT DESTINATIONS

COUNTRY	SALES	PERCENT
Germany	\$2,197,750,000	28.9%
United Kingdom	\$1,110,050,000	14.6%
France	\$989,360,000	13.0%
Italy	\$491,700,000	6.5%
Belgium	\$321,840,000	4.2%
Other countries	\$2,483,830,000	32.7%
TOTAL:	\$7,594,530,000	100.0%

TOP 5 CUT FLOWERS SOLD



TOP 5 IMPORT FLOWERS



FLOWER	Rose	Chrysanthemum	Tulip	Lily	Gerbera daisy		Rose	Baby's breath	St. John's wort	Carnation	Calla lily
TOTAL SALES	\$1,169,650,000	\$399,320,000	\$327,800,000	\$236,910,000	\$171,350,000		\$497,660,000	\$41,720,000	\$35,760,000	\$20,860,000	\$13,410,000
No. OF STEM	3,365,000,000	1,279,000,000	1,468,000,000	378,000,000	859,000,000						