

Italian floriculture back on its feet

Italy is officially still in a recession. However, the atmosphere at [Myplant & Garden](#) was remarkably positive. After several years of downturn, Italian growers are finally making money again. Both the export and domestic markets are picking up. Greenery seems to be gaining popularity. Attention for sustainability on the other hand, is only slowly emerging.

By Arie-Frans Middelburg

The figures aren't very rosy. The Italian national debt is more than 2,400 billion euros, the average national unemployment rate is 12% and many well-trained Italians are leaving the country each year to take up jobs abroad. None of this was evident, though, at the latest edition of Myplant & Garden. The floriculture fair is growing rapidly, and the Italian growers were in a good mood during this fifth edition. The forecasts for the Italian plant and flower trade are positive for the coming year.

The sunshine probably added to the general feeling of optimism; the weather is a determining factor in the Italian floriculture sales after all. "You can feel that things are picking up again. Garden centres that I haven't heard from for two months, are getting back in touch", said Jens Hermansen, marketing manager with [GASA Group](#) Denmark.



Better balance

But it isn't all down to the weather. Many nurseries had to close their doors during the Italian crisis years between 2009 and 2015, simply because they weren't generating enough revenue. It seems like

this was particularly true for plants, trees and shrubs. As a result, the balance between demand and supply on the Italian market is better now. The situation with flowers is slightly different. Although there were also some flower growers that dropped out, quite a few survived by joining forces in a cooperative. And they now have enough volume for exports.

The new export opportunities were an important reason for the cheerfulness of many of the growers at Myplant. They realise they don't have to depend on the domestic market alone. [Floramiata](#) from Piancastagnaio is a good example. The 127-ha company grows tropical plants. Their 30-ha greenhouses are heated by geothermal energy. Until four years ago, Floramiata distributed only within Italy, but now they export throughout Europe, reported directors Enrico Barcelli and Marco Cappellini. Floramiata's workforce decreased dramatically, though. They started back in the eighties with 500 employees, mostly people who used to work in the local mercury mines, which were all closing down at that time. Nowadays, they've got 140 employees left.

Green is healthy

Growers aren't unhappy about the domestic market, either. Despite the high unemployment rate, especially in the south, the recession has the biggest impact on the government. "The Italian government doesn't have any money, but the Italians do", was a widely-heard comment. Apparently, taxes aren't very high in Italy.



Another reason why the Italian market is doing better than previous years, is that there's more awareness of the health benefits of greenery. "When I arrived in Italy with my 'Plants for People' story twelve years ago, people said: What are you talking about? But nowadays, there's more attention for the health benefits of plants. The Italians are more open to the idea now", explained Charles Lansdorp of [Floweracademy](#). However, he pointed out, a city like Milan still doesn't have an awful lot of green space.

But if you go to [Viridea](#), with nine locations the largest garden-centre chain in Italy, nowadays, you'll find a selection of [Air So Pure](#) plants, as well as their own concept of air-purifying plants.

Another important stimulus for a greener Italy is the subsidy that the government has introduced for individuals who hire a professional company for the landscaping of their new garden or the renovation of their existing garden. People can get reimbursed for 36% of the costs via their taxes over a five-year period, with a maximum of 5,000 euros. The government set aside 600 million euros for this.

Great success

According to Nada Forbia of the [Associazione Florovivaisti Della Lombardia](#), who lobbied for the law with the minister of agriculture, it's a great success. The law didn't go into effect until May last year and, compared to 2017, the number of gardens created in 2018 increased by 30%. All those gardens make Italy a greener place. They're expecting to see an even bigger effect this year.



The law is also good news for landscape gardeners, as well as tree, shrub and bedding plant growers. Tree grower Paolo Arienti agreed. His 100-ha nursery is located 100 km east of Milan. He exports many of his trees, but also likes to distribute locally. "Aesthetics alone won't get you very far. But when you tell the governors about the air-purifying qualities of trees and plants, the politicians are

all ears. They no longer view the purchase of greenery as an expense, but as an investment instead”, said Arienti.

There is an additional reason why the government welcomed this new law, though. In the past, a lot of gardening work was in the black economy. They hope that the new law will help put an end to that, too.

Pensioners

When it comes to sustainability, Italy isn't as far along as countries like Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. Mark Major, one of the directors of Viridea, explained it like this: “Plants are mostly bought by pensioners, as they often have a garden. And they don't ask for organic products. Or MPS. It might change when a younger generation is going to buy more plants.” According to Major, you won't see too many organic vegetables in the shops in Italy, either.

On the exhibition floor, Italian plant-pot producers [Idel](#) and [Nuova Pasquini & Bini](#) said some of their pots are made using recyclable materials. They are exploring more materials but couldn't say much about that yet.



Kind to the earth

On the other hand, there were indications that Italy is slowly switching to a more sustainable approach. In the herb and vegetable segment, to start with. Italian nursery [Vigo](#) for example, uses biodegradable pots produced by [Modiform](#). They propagate their herb plants in plastic pots and transfer them to the eco pots in a biodegradable tray at a later stage. The plastic pots are reused. “We're trying to be kind to the earth”, said Sabina Borretta of Vigo. According to her, these pots are gaining popularity, especially in Germany. The main aspect that's stopping growers from using them, is that they are more expensive than plastic pots. “That's always the problem with sustainability”, said Borretta.

But at the end of the day, changes must be made, also by plant and flower growers. The Italians have little choice, because sustainable production and sustainable packaging materials are highly valued in other countries. Giuseppe D’Aniello, limonium grower in Battipaglia and Pompeii, has already adjusted his cultivation method. “When Dutch exporters are asking for sustainably-produced flowers, that’s what Italian growers need to supply.”