

Dutch cut cymbidium grown in Guatemala



Star Orchids is a traditional horticultural company from the Westland area and since long located in the village of 's-Gravenzande in the Netherlands. The decision cut cymbidium growers Wim and Jan Valstar are making right now is therefore pretty remarkable. This month they started the construction of a brand new nursery in Guatemala, together with a local partner. 'A project like this is no piece of cake, but we feel good about it.'

Wim and Jan Valstar are now the third generation owners of Star Orchids. They originally were engaged in the production of tomatoes and sweet peppers. Twelve years ago they started the production of cut cymbidium. That change was triggered by Wim's sweet pepper allergy, but the brothers already had doubts about their future in vegetable production. 'In the vegetable sector there was a strong tendency to keep increasing production', says Jan, 'and we were asking ourselves if we wanted to go along with this trend'. The answer was 'no' and therefore the brothers looked for an alternative. 'We wanted to produce on substrate and to cultivate a crop that not anyone can start up just like that. In the end we had to choose between cut anthurium and cut cymbidium and chose the latter, a decision we both felt good about'. The brothers didn't make things easy for themselves. 'We didn't want to grow by colour, but mixed,' says Jan. In practice this means you always have to have yellow, green, white and pink available. To be able to solve that puzzle, that was the challenge we were looking for.'

'One thing leads to another' During the past twelve years Star Orchids has expanded its production from 10.000 square meters to 2 hectares and various renovations have been accomplished. Wim and Jan each have distinct tasks within the company. Wim is in charge of crop cultivation and all other production issues. Jan is responsible for all other matters, including sales. 'We know what we are doing, keep each other informed and trust each other as well,' says Jan. 'The trust we built between us is extremely

important, because you really depend on each other.' Star Orchids sells its flowers throughout Europe and its end consumers are the flower shops. 'Florists include the cut cymbidium often in flower arrangements and bouquets and especially in Southern Europe it is a popular flower,' says Jan. Star Orchids is receiving an average price for its product, indicates Jan. 'In addition we are able to maintain our production levels'. To achieve this, the brothers never avoided necessary investments. In 's Gravezande however there is no more room to expand. 'Expansion in itself is not really our ambition', says Jan, we always say 'what happens, happens'. And that is exactly how they heard about Guatemala... Let's be clear, doing business abroad was never really planned by Wim nor Jan. On the contrary, the entrepreneurs always said they never wanted to work from two different locations. Until they met Flores Bohemia during the Floraholland Trade Fair in 2013, a Guatemalan strelitzia nursery with more than 23 years of experience. 'They asked if we were interested in setting up a nursery in Guatemala to produce cut cymbidiums.' Although this request was quite unexpected, the brothers Valstar were interested immediately. 'We sat down to discuss their plans and noticed we got along right away,' says Jan. 'Both companies have a lot in common and we're both family businesses. That made us realize that cooperation was indeed a realistic possibility.' Soon after that, the ball got rolling and following a first meeting with general manager Sergio van Loon, father Carlos and son José

González, owners of Flores Bohemia, visited the Netherlands. Not long after Jan Valstar travelled to Guatemala and was positively impressed. 'At first I had to look up Guatemala on the world map,' smiles Jan when he remembers how it all started. 'But soon we got really enthusiastic. The country was appealing, the business plan was fine and thus our interest grew to really set up a joint venture together.'

Ideal climate

The reason why Flores Bohemia approached Star Orchids is simple. 'They wanted to expand their product range and asked their clients in the US about their requirements. The delivery of cut cymbidiums was on their list and while searching for the right partner producing high quality flowers, they ended up in the Netherlands and finally found us.' Wim Valstar indicates that export of cut cymbidiums from the Netherlands to the United States does exist, but quality control is a problem. 'In addition, transport costs are high. These problems are solved with production in Guatemala, also because the cymbidiums can be transported via the existing logistical connections of the strelitzias.' The approach of Flores Bohemia was thus successful and after an initial phase of getting to know each other, both companies signed contracts for the set-up of Holland Orchids S.A., the name of the new company. And that is when the first real challenge started. 'We had to build a new company from scratch,' says Jan 'and we had to set up a joint venture abroad, but didn't have any experience in this field. This is very complex and

takes time. The next step was the search for a suitable production location in Guatemala. We found our perfect spot in Patzicia, a village some 75 kilometres from the capital of Guatemala City. 'There we found altitude', says Wim, 'the production location will be situated at 2200 metres above sea level, and there's an ideal climate for the production of cut cymbidium. When starting this adventure, our demands were that we had to find a good quality water source and a suitable climate. On this location we have found both.' During the next few months a greenhouse of 1 ha will be built and both companies intend to expand once the business is up and running and successful. 'Recently we started building the greenhouse,' says Jan. A Dutch greenhouse that is, the joint venture works with Dutch partners like Stolze, Priva and the VB Group. 'Furthermore, Dutch greenhouse builder VDH Plastic Greenhouses is responsible for the greenhouse construction, and this company has already gained a lot of experience in Central America. For us it was important to work with companies that are already active abroad and have experience with this kind of projects.'

Dutch crop consultant

When everything goes as planned, the Holland Orchids S.A. greenhouse will be ready later this year. And a new challenge will come along; setting up the actual production. In this field the knowhow and experience of Star Orchids is crucial, indicates Jan. 'Everything that concerns the plot of land, the construction, permits and regulations, our local partner is taking care of. We provide the knowledge to set up the best possible production.' A Dutch crop consultant will be hired and will travel several times a year to Guatemala to make sure everything goes according to plan. In addition, several Guatemalans did an internship with Star Orchids in 's Gravenzande and this will continue. Via the climate computer Wim and Jan can log in on a daily basis and check if everything goes well in Guatemala. 'We will have to get used to that in the beginning, I'm sure,' says Wim. 'Here at our own location we can manage everything ourselves, while in Guatemala we have to depend a lot on others. We know we work with the right people and we trust everything will be okay, I think that for us it will be difficult at times.' Star Orchids and Flores Bohemis hope to have the first flowers for export ready by the end of 2016. The majority of the flowers produced will be exported to the United States, part will be sold on the local market. 'It is all really exciting and everything is new to us,' says Wim. 'Our greatest challenges lie in delivering quality and an optimal efficiency and performance. We don't think this will be easy, but we are fully confident that together, we can make this project successful.'

'Our greatest challenges are quality and performance'