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on the verge of big
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TPIE

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the new trade show
season in South Florida

Flower festivals herald start of spring

*Floralies Holland, Keukenhof,
Goyang show Korea and
Canada's Blooms ready to blossom*

Women's Day

In the ornamental horticulture industry there are few companies managed and run exclusively by women. On the occasion of International Women's Day (March 8th) FloraCulture International travelled down to Albenga, Italy where Thalia Flor is owned by Tiziana Busnardo and Barbara di Tommaso.



Left to right Enrica, Luisella, Alice, Tiziana, Barbara and Roberta.

Girl Power, Girl Flower

The Albenga Plain is formed by a huge delta and is the Italian Riviera's only real flat area on the 'Ponente' (eastern) side. Here, over the past few years, the production of flowers and plants has dramatically increased, while in other areas such as Sanremo ornamental horticulture is near extinction due to logistical problems and high land prices. Albenga's floriculture has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it is blessed with a wonderful climate, a well-oiled logistic system and an assortment of products (mainly herbs and daisies) particularly interesting for importers from Northern Europe. Among the disadvantages are the excessive fragmentation of small-sized, family-run enterprises, a strong internal competition, which

by Aldo Colombo

is reflected in low prices, and a remarkable seasonality, as most of the products are sold in a narrow span of two/three months per year.

The Women's Company

Thalia Flor is dubbed the women's company. Its two owners, Tiziana Busnardo and Barbara di Tommaso, have indeed wanted to surround themselves, in many of the key positions in the company, with other women.

Tiziana says that she and Barbara worked together for four years in the same Albenga-based trade company. "We were effective team players right from the start. I was taking care of administration and logistics, while Barbara was involved in production and marketing. Then, the firm announced a reorganisation on management level which lead

us to consider founding our own company."

Destiny helped the starting business women as they immediately found premises.

"Meanwhile, the firm where we previously worked announced another big change and the person who received the greatest responsibility was someone we got along with very well. So, instead of competing with our previous employer, we decided to cooperate," said Tiziana.

In September 2007, Tiziana and Barbara started their business.

"During the first autumn season we had a sound and consolidated customer base in France. From there our project took off, and is still going on, with ups and downs due to the ever changing market," outlined Barbara.

Albenga epicentre of potted plant production

According to the news agency ADN Kronos, the production of pot plants in Albenga represents 20% of the total Italian market, 120 million plants per year. Besides the Italian market, the plants are reaching the consumers of Central and Northern Europe, and recently also those of Eastern Europe. The most important products are daisies (12 million plants), cyclamen (5 million), rosemary (30 million), lavender (20 million) and sage (5 million). However, the assortment is now wider, especially for flowering pot plants.



No master

Being surrounded by mainly women can be challenging. Not so at Thalia Flor, ensured Barbara. “We are good in multitasking. Tiziana is responsible for our marketing department and works together with our sales team. I handle a wide range of administrative responsibilities together with people I would rather describe as my colleagues than my employees. This leads to good relationships as in this company there is no ‘master’. Horticulture is a man's world, where it is often difficult to get respect and trust from the people you work with. Barbara: “A lot of people didn't like the idea of two female-entrepreneurs. But our company also employs male workers particularly in the warehouse. Generally speaking, a man who has to take orders from a woman, can put up some resistance. In this job, to get respect, you have to demonstrate what your capacities are. Since we started from scratch, we have learned to play all roles. I load the truck, I drive the forklift and I prepare the plants for shipping. So I have demonstrated to ‘my boys’ that I can do everything on my own, thus earning their consideration, respect and trust.”

To flourish again

The name of the company is that of the Muse of Comedy. “In fact, the origin of the company name is a little bit different: the name actually derives from the Greek verb ‘thalein’ which means ‘to be born again’, ‘to flourish again’. Our idea was to create a young, dynamic, innovative company and we wanted to look for a name stating that,” explained Tiziana. She continued, “Even if we were connected to the flower market that everybody knows, we also had to propose something fresh, new and different. Hence the name ‘Thalia’, connected more to the root of the verb than to the Muse of Comedy.”

Export sales

Over the years Thalia Flor underwent several changes. “During the first three years the French market represented almost all our turnover.

Then we explored the Italian market, mainly in the Piedmont and Veneto regions. Meanwhile sales in France started to drop a little so we started to serve clients in Austria, Switzerland and, since last year, also in Germany. For next year, we should have a share of 50/50, between our traditional outlet, the French market, and these new ones. Unfortunately, we are cutting back on the Italian market, keeping just those ‘loyal’ customers who operate well with us. We realise, however, that doing business in Italy is becoming more and more difficult,” said Barbara.

Happy island

In terms of logistics, Thalia Flor deliberately rented its warehouse far away from its main production and marketing area.

Barbara: “On one hand this penalises us as some growers are complaining about having to move for bringing their products here. On the other hand, being away from the traditional commercial area makes us feel like a ‘happy island’, which for several other aspects is rewarding. We have 600m² of glasshouses with concrete floors and 400m² with semi-mobile tunnels. In addition, we have a 800m² outdoor yard.”

The market has dramatically changed over the past few years. “The traditional wholesale is show-



ing its age as companies like ours can more easily supply a single garden centre with just one or two trolleys. Garden centres prefer to purchase directly from our company, thus avoiding the cost of a broker or wholesaler,” said Barbara.

The female touch

At Thalia Flor it is not difficult to find the female touch. Tiziana: “We provide added value in terms of paper cache-pots, ceramic pots or polka dot bags with bows for Mother's Day: a whole series of ideas to be included in the garden centres, showing a little more of this female footprint. Our femininity comes out clearly in our company presentation, at trade shows or in our brochures. The French market is definitely very receptive to these details and also the German market appreciates them.”

Quality, price, and service, however, are three factors that are critical to the success of any company. “Our success also depends on a well-oiled logistics process allowing us to deliver our customers always ‘on time’,” commented Barbara. When asked if March 8th at Thalia Flor will be a special occasion, Tiziana said, “It will be a day like any other and hopefully full of work, with wonderful sun and the warehouse jam-packed with trolleys! The only thing that reminds us of the Women's Day is mimosa, which in our country is a traditional gift to women on March 8th.” III