

ROSE PRODUCTION GOES HI-TECH ON THIS FARM

By Maricar Cinco
@maricarcincoINQ

ALFONSO, CAVITE—Like a beauty queen, Meanne Mendoza walked through rows of roses, cradling in one arm a bunch of freshly cut red ones, one Friday afternoon.

It was harvest time. With a pair of shears, she snipped each stem swift and clean, demonstrating her mastery of the task.

"I've been here 18 years already, even before I [took up] agriculture and graduated," Mendoza said.

The 38-year-old supervisor of a 4,000-square-meter greenhouse for countless red roses believes the flowers bloom best in an atmosphere of "peace and happiness."

"I noticed that when there was quarreling [among the staff], they [flowers] don't really bloom well," she said.

She said she sometimes quietly talks to the buds. "When we still had the radio around, I would even play instrumental music for them," she said.

Modern agriculture

The rose greenhouse is automated and one of seven operated by Philippine Cut Flower Corp., which specializes in producing the "sensitive" and "perishable" roses with Dutch and French technology, said company president Dustin Andaya.

Andaya's late father, Armando Andaya, was a pioneer of sorts in the cut flower industry in the Philippines.

In 1983, the elder Andaya, who ran a consultancy firm, visited Holland to look at flood

control projects but became attracted instead to greenhouse technology, which he brought back home.

Andaya's father chose not just any crop to benefit from this Dutch technology but "one of the most difficult" plants to grow—roses.

"Not only that, [he] wanted to start a business and [he] also wanted to make a statement on how to modernize Philippine agriculture," Andaya said.

Farm to e-commerce

The company has since become the country's biggest indoor cut flower grower, producing two million stems annually with the Island Rose brand.

Its farm sits on a 5.5-hectare property in a fairly secluded part of Alfonso, Cavite province, about 15 kilometers

from Tagaytay City.

One of the farm's seven computer-automated greenhouses is made of glass and is the only one of its kind in the country. It uses the Dutch technology while the others with plastic roofs run on technology from France.

Inside the greenhouses, temperature is controlled with the shades closing and opening, depending on the weather and available sunlight. A modern misting system and fans combat humidity. Water and nutrients are automatically and directly pumped into the soil close to the roots.

The farm grows at least 10 European varieties—from the most common red and white roses to the rare pink, orange and lavender.

For several years, the com-

pany was a wholesaler, supplying roses to local flower shops and hotels until Andaya joined the family business in 2000 and started its online brand and shop, IslandRose.net.

"That makes us the longest running e-commerce site [as an online flower shop]," said Andaya, adding that couriers didn't believe then that flowers ordered online could be delivered fresh.

Today, Island Rose also caters to individual local customers and overseas, including Hong Kong, Guam and Japan. They account for as much as 75 percent of the company's sales.

Experimental varieties

Valentine's is one of the busiest seasons at the farm when twice the number of its regular staff of 35 need to be hired.

While most Filipinos feel "romantic" about giving flowers, Andaya said "we don't give flowers enough."

"In other countries, when they visit a friend, when it's their secretary's birthday, when they invite you to dinner, they bring flowers," Andaya said.

According to Andaya, they are developing "experimental varieties" more suited to Filipinos and customized packaging and options that would include stuffed toys or chocolates.

He said the company has a strict policy on privacy that even minimized opportunities for their own staff to see clients' personal dedications.

"It's really important because people trust us with their address and they trust us with their message, which is even more important," he said. INQ

* AGRICULTURE

* FARMING