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Lovers Abroad Boost Local Flower Sales

By Alexander Bratersky

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Buying flowers is a task confronting men around the world as they try to minimize costs and please their women. **Vladimir Filonov**

The country's florists are readying to cash in on the approaching Valentine's Day celebration, while foreign romantics are frantically searching for ways to purchase bouquets and have them delivered locally.

"Foreigners are buying more modest bouquets, but more frequently, while Russians buy less often, but spend more on each purchase,"said Yelena Razumova, general director of Interflora.

Interflora, founded in 1908 in Berlin, is the only international operator on the local flower market. They are one of several florists that deliver around Russia.

Razumova said that Western Christmas and Valentine's Day are the most popular events for people abroad who want to send flowers to Russia.

"We are expecting a mad house," she said about next Thursday's holiday.

The majority of orders come from the United States, followed by Britain and Germany. Orders are also coming from Central Europe and Australia. The minimum price of a bouquet is about $70.

Industry experts say red roses are the most popular flowers purchased by foreign men to send to their girlfriends in Russia. Interflora charges about $100 for a basic bouquet of a dozen roses.

For AMF, which is another big player on the Russian flower market that delivers to the territory of the former Soviet Union and European countries, foreigners looking to purchase online are not an interesting segment because prices are expensive.

The average cost of a bouquet of flowers ordered online for delivery in Moscow is 6,000 rubles ($200) while the same gift costs about $50 in Europe, said AMF chief executive Stanislav Mishutkin.

While foreign buyers are a fraction of the customers, the majority who buy online are Russians who send them to their significant others to Europe, Mishutkin said.

Taliya Akhmetova, a spokeswoman for Moscow-based Florist.ru — a company that supplies flowers to the future Russian brides of foreign men — agrees with Mishutkin. "Our business took off because Russian brides were in bloom," Akhmetova said. But today, foreigners account for only 10 percent of clients, she added. "Now there is no boom," she said.

The majority of Florist.ru clients are coming from the United States, Britain and Germany.

Most of the foreigners looking to purchase flowers for Valentine's Day turn to companies that specialize in such deliveries. The U.S.-based Russian Flora offers 11 roses for $104.95. Delivery is free of charge for orders over $30, according to the company's web site.

Foreigners shopping for flowers in Russia online do not represent a significant portion on the Russian fresh flower market, which was valued at $3.5 billion in 2011, and is growing rapidly. According to Global Reach consulting group, 1.5 billion flowers were sold in Russia in 2012.

Roses are the most popular choice for gift givers, although 90 percent of them are imported. "The popularity of a rose is always there. A rose is a perfect choice," said Razumova from Interflora. Though there is a catch some Russian women actually don't like roses, but are embarrassed to admit it, Razumova said.

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