



Credit: [Jerry Wolford](#) / News & Record

**Nancy Wright works in the showroom of Hardin's Wholesale Florist Supply in Liberty. Shipments of roses were coming in from around the world this week as Hardin's prepared for Valentine's Day. The company began preparations months in Advance of today's holiday.**

**While lovebirds are plotting magic and romance, wholesale florists are hard at work to ensure:**



A package of red roses waits in the cooler. U.S. florists sold about 214 million roses for Valentine's Day 2008, according to [www.aboutflowers.com](http://www.aboutflowers.com). Nearly 40 percent of people buy red roses.

# ROSE SEASON BLOOMS

Saturday, February 14

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By [Richard M. Barron](#) Staff Writer for the Greensboro News & Record

LIBERTY - The spark of romance starts in an icy warehouse in Liberty.

In the past five days, workers in the big cooler at Hardin's Wholesale have unloaded, sorted and delivered 500,000 long-stem roses to florists in central North Carolina in time for the love of Valentine's Day to bloom.

That's 42,000 bouquets - enough roses to line a 157-mile path straight to your sweetie's door.

The flowers' sentimental journey began thousands of miles and a hemisphere away in Colombia and Ecuador, where the majority of America's cut flowers are grown, said Billy Hardin, president of the Triad's largest wholesale floral distributor.

The family business is 75 years old and still operates in an old industrial section of Liberty.

Computers and aircraft make a complex job easier and faster, but Hardin still keeps the same routine to make sure his roses hit town just ahead of Cupid.

So the work begins before Christmas.



**Valentine's Day is a "one-day holiday" that starts before Christmas for Billy Hardin.**

"Even though it's a one-day holiday there's a lot involved making sure there's a lot of flights from Bogota and trucks from Miami," said Hardin, his smooth demeanor unfazed by the frenzy in his warehouse.

He's calm and he wants consumers to feel the same way.

"All they want to do is call up the florist and say give me a dozen roses and make it happen and that's all they should have to do," he said.

When the flowers start rolling in, Hardin and his staff of 85 workers have two weeks of nonstop work to process them through to local florists.

That's two weeks to handle the biggest piece of his company's fresh flower business for the year. This year, Monday through Thursday before the holiday were the busiest.

Valentine's Day is the top fresh-flower holiday and accounts for 40 percent of dollar volume for those flowers. Good roses cost about \$60 to \$75 a dozen, he said.



**Billy Hardin at his business Tuesday in Liberty.**

Credit: [Jerry Wolford](#) / News & Record

U.S. florists sold about 214 million roses for Valentine's Day 2008, according to [www.aboutflowers.com](http://www.aboutflowers.com). Red roses are the most popular, with consumers choosing them for 39 percent of their purchases.

But a bad recession and the fact that Valentine's Day occurs on a Saturday may dampen the glow of the heart this year as logistics and finances get in the way.

Tracy Wilson, who owns Stroud Florist on High Point Road, said she ordered 10 percent fewer flowers this year out of concern that the recession has cut the money consumers will spend.

And because most flowers are delivered to offices, she said, this year's Valentine's Day is considered a split holiday, with most offices closed on Saturday. That could hurt traffic.

Still, "there are several thousand roses in our cooler right now," Wilson said earlier in the week.

And business wasn't slowing down.

"Not yet. It feels crazy right now," said Wilson. "We're trying to plan it out so we will have as little product left over as possible but still be able to serve our customers."

Wilson, who bought the shop last year, grew up with her family in the floral business, and she has worked with Hardin's for at least 13 years.

Hardin's, which operates a showroom beside its warehouse to show supplies, arrangements and vases for florists, is the only one of its kind outside Charlotte and Raleigh, Wilson said.

Billy Hardin said his business appears to be good this year, despite the recession.

It helps to have the long relationships with florists and suppliers, he said.

In the early days of Hardin's, the company grew roses. But the plants, which need warm days and cool nights, did not flourish in the steamy North Carolina climate, which remains warm at night.

The rusting greenhouses on West Bowman Avenue in Liberty are what remains of Hardin's long-stem venture.

Big farms in South America can supply the biggest and longest roses, he said, because they have the consistent climate to let the plants mature for several years.

Roses that are sold more cheaply in grocery and discount stores, he said, are often earlier growth flowers with shorter, narrower stems, he said.

A long-stem rose is more expensive, he said, because more work goes into it.

Critics argue that these farms exploit workers and use heavy pesticides to help their flowers grow. And organic flowers are attracting more support.

But for now, the hillside farms are the big players, and they keep Hardin and his customers satisfied with the beauty of the holiday - and beyond.

"There's a lot of people who order after the 14th," Hardin said, "because they forgot what they were supposed to do."