

FORTUNE

SMALL BUSINESS

The Next Little Thing

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Lured Away Her Staff and
Clients, **SHE FOUGHT BACK**
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GERALD PROLMAN, 47, founder of Organic Bouquet, stands five-foot-six. The roses he begins selling in 2007 grow even taller.

Six-Foot Roses

ORGANIC BOUQUET

organicbouquet.com

GERALD PROLMAN FOUNDED ORGANIC Bouquet with the belief that a growing number of consumers want their flowers to deliver two messages: "I care about you, and I care about the earth too." Now the 47-year-old retailer has found a way to let his customers send their sentiments in a big way. Early in 2007 he will introduce a six-foot-long rose to the U.S. market.

Prolman calls them "extreme roses." The flowers may be taller than the person who receives them, and they boast a larger head size—the blossoms open to almost four inches wide, about twice the industry norm—as well

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as a higher petal count, a minimum vase life of seven days (compared with about five for standard roses), and unique colors. Red Intuition is light red with streaks of deep crimson, Pink Intuition follows the same variegated pattern, with pale pink and fuchsia, and for the traditionalist, there's a classic red.

These supersized roses were not engineered to reach six feet, but the grower, John Nevado, president of Nevado Ecuador, a farm in Latacunga, Ecuador, noticed that a few varieties produced unusually long stems. "We sell to the high-end Russian market, where long stems are in demand," Nevado says. "So we decided to see how far we could push it." While any grower could attempt the same feat, Nevado believes his

farm can beat the competition though careful management of the crop. Shade cloths in the greenhouse control light levels, encouraging stems to grow longer before the buds form. A fine-mesh sleeve around each bud keeps it

Making the supreme declaration of love will cost you about \$21 a stem, or \$250 for a dozen, with shipping.

from opening before the stem reaches its full length. The farm's location near the equator and its altitude—nestled between two volcanoes at more than 9,600 feet above sea level—provide the powerful, consistent sunlight that oversized roses require.

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The farm has won certifications worldwide for its environmentally and socially responsible practices, including one from the new U.S.-based VeriFlora program, a private organization that helps consumers find eco-friendly flowers produced using sustainable methods and better conditions for workers. That made it a good partner for Organic Bouquet, and Prolman negotiated a deal with Nevado to be the sole supplier of the roses in the U.S.

Making the supreme declaration of love will not come cheap. Each flower takes 100 days to grow, two to three times the industry norm. All that shading and sleeving require more labor, and the six-footers have to be shipped in special boxes. "You should have seen the expression on the delivery guy's face," Prolman says. "He couldn't

believe we had roses that long." Prolman's roses will set you back about \$21 a stem, or \$250 for a dozen (including shipping). He has already placed an advance order for 100,000 in 2007.

Launched in 2001 and based in San Rafael, Calif., Organic Bouquet today employs 14 people and posts annual revenues of \$3 million. "What people fantasize about in a rose—we deliver that," Prolman says. "But we're selling integrity too." Most of all, he knows that it takes a big rose to make a big statement. "They don't get any bigger than this," he says. "And if they do, we'll find a box for them." —AMY STEWART

Amy Stewart is the author of Flower Confidential: The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful in the Business of Flowers, coming from Algonquin Books in February.