



## JJ Viljoen

Innovations  
marketer

### THE UNREALITY CHECK

- Uses locally developed technology to preserve fresh roses for up to six months
- Taps into the €22bn/year fresh-cut flower market
- Plans to export 100 000 roses a month by the end of 2010
- Employs 15 people to treat roses on site



# Extending the bloom

**Business consultant JJ Viljoen** has commercialised a number of innovative ideas in his time. But when the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth asked him to help market a new technology that preserves fresh cut roses for up to six months — or even longer — he was intrigued.

"Though I have a background in agricultural economics, I'm not a particularly enthusiastic gardener, and I don't have an especially keen interest in flowers, but the concept was unique and interesting," says the ex-Zimbabwean, who has lived in Johannesburg since the eighties. "After some initial market research I saw the product had enormous potential."

Originally developed by Tienie Maske, a farmer's wife in the Eastern Cape, the process involves keeping the flowers at an optimum temperature after harvesting, removing the sap from the petals and leaves and replacing it with a preservative. This keeps them looking pristine for months on end. The fragrance is also artificially "enhanced".

Viljoen says the décor market is increasingly demanding flowers that offer a longer vase life, avoiding the hassle of maintenance and replacement costs.

"People have been trying for decades to

extend the life of fresh flowers, using everything from chlorine to freeze drying," he says. "Over the past few years, there's been a shift towards artificial flowers, but people still prefer the look and feel of a natural bloom."

Kick-started with a loan of R5m from the Industrial Development Corp, which liked the idea of supporting a start-up using local technology, Viljoen worked for five years to perfect the process of preserving the flowers. He then conducted a pilot phase to test the business model. Only recently has the company started exporting to the Southern African region, targeting households, corporates and the hospitality industry.

Situated close to flower farms in Muldersdrift outside Johannesburg, the company now employs 15 staff, who treat the roses on site. "We plan to be selling between 30 000 and 50 000 roses a month by the end of this year and doubling that over the next year," says Viljoen.

Originally called African Everose, the company has been renamed African Flora Lush.

Other companies have developed technologies that preserve roses. There is a Columbian supplier of long-lasting flowers for example, that produces a slightly

more expensive product due to a more capital-intensive and complex production process. But Viljoen believes the process used by African Flora Lush is unique. "We are at the forefront of an emerging technology," he says.

The global market for cut flowers is worth more than €22bn/year, roses making up about 25% of all flowers purchased. The artificial flower market in which the company competes "as a natural alternative" has been growing by 38%/annum by import value in recent years, he says. The company therefore focused its initial efforts on preserving roses and a range of complementary foliage, but Viljoen hopes to diversify into the preservation of other flowers in the coming months.

He is also setting up a floral décor service to provide flowers in floral arrangements to clients, who can then choose to replace the arrangements regularly at significantly reduced costs.

The company's roses retail for about R25-R30/rose, while fresh cut roses are priced at about R7-R15.

"The investment pays off over three to four weeks, as you don't have to replace them as often or keep topping them up with water," he says.

**Jacqui Pile**