



Going dutch

Famous for its bicycles and canals, Amsterdam is also home to the world's biggest flower auction. **Wedding Flowers** follows the experts from **John Lewis** on their search for the up-and-coming blooms for 2008

John Lewis buyer Nicole Wale and in-house floral designer Jane Scott visit Amsterdam four times a year to plan each season's floral collections. With its world-famous markets and wholesale auction, which dictates the price of flowers across the globe, this is the place the pros go to spot the latest trends and choose the blooms that will be appearing in next season's collections. During each trip they'll also visit their wholesaler and packer as well as shopping in local florists, boutiques and interior design emporiums for inspiration – it's a packed schedule.

Pure inspiration

"We find The Nine Streets area the best for shopping in Amsterdam," says Jane. "It's here that we look for ideas to inspire us for the spring 2008 collection." A big selling point for John Lewis is giving the customer something they can keep after the flowers have died, so Jane and Nicole are always on the look out for attractive vases. During the course of the morning, Jane finds a cute pale blue china teapot in Riviera Maison, one of her favourite shops, and snaps up a brightly coloured Oriental-style vase from local florist Gerda's Bloemen. "This is a really eye-catching vase – once it's filled with matching flowers it will make a great gift," she says. We then walk along the world-famous Floating Flower Market where the flower stalls stand on houseboats along the canal. This is the best place to find all types of tulips, narcissus and other bulb flowers and to look for new varieties and interesting colour combinations. It's not long before Jane spots a pretty hand-tied bouquet in soft ice-cream shades. "I love these sorbet colours and they'll be perfect for a spring bouquet," she explains.

Under the hammer

The following day is a very early start as we head to the auction for 5am. Before it begins we meet up with the John Lewis wholesaler to check out the flowers before they're auctioned off. Jane and Nicole then

set about pointing out the flowers they'd like for next year's spring collection, which their wholesaler will purchase on their behalf. Top of their list is to source flowers to recreate the bouquet they saw on the Floating Flower Market as well as colourful orange flowers to arrange in the teapot and some vivid red- and green-coloured flowers to fill the Oriental-style vase. We enter the hustle and bustle of the auction room and take our seats in an auditorium-style hall, where buyers are sitting with microphones and computers ready to place their bids. The auction takes place every week day from 6am until 10am and sets the world price for flowers and plants by means of the auction clock – a fascinating process during which buyers snap up flowers in a matter of seconds. The price starts high and goes down as the clock ticks. The first person to press the button sets the price for the flowers being auctioned. This explains why flower prices go up during peak periods such as Christmas and Mother's Day – demand is high, so rather than miss out, the buyer will purchase early at the top price.

The selection process

After the auction, we head to the wholesaler where the flowers selected at auction will soon be delivered. As soon as they arrive, Jane sets about designing some flower arrangements using the containers she'd found on her shopping spree the previous day. "It's a real team effort," explains Nicole. "Jane looks at flowers with a creative eye and I tend to view them with a more commercial and business head to ensure the end result is the right style and price for our customer." The designs are then costed and anything that's too expensive is redone using different flowers and foliage until everyone is happy with the final result. Once the decisions have been made, the team will order all the flowers required for the collection. 📷

JANE AND NICOLE'S TIPS FOR PLANNING YOUR WEDDING FLOWERS

- 💖 Create a scrapbook of ideas from magazines – not just **Wedding and Wedding Flowers**, but fashion and interiors titles, too.
- 💖 Visit your local flower market to see the different colours and varieties on offer.
- 💖 When choosing tablecentres, look for containers that guests can take home after the wedding as a memento of your big day.
- 💖 If you're worried about your carbon footprint, ask your florist to source Fairtrade roses, which are ethically farmed.
- 💖 For a greener wedding, choose seasonal, home-grown flowers, such as daffodils, narcissi and tulips in spring or delphiniums and peonies in summer.
- 💖 Be prepared to pay more for flowers during peak periods, including Christmas, Mother's Day and Valentine's Day.
- 💖 To cut costs, choose seasonal flowers, ask for more foliage and fewer flowers or persuade your florist to source a cheaper vase or container.

MARKET DAY

You can find inspiration for your wedding flowers at a flower market near you.

Take a camera to record what you like.

Columbia Road Market

London E2 (www.columbia-flower-market.freewebspace.com)

New Covent Garden Flower Market

Nine Elms Lane, London SW8
(020 7720 2211, www.cgma.gov.uk)

Glasgow's Wholesale Fruit, Vegetable and Flower Market

130 Blochairn Road, Glasgow (0141 287 2500, www.glasgow.gov.uk)

Western International

Market Centre, Hayes Road, Southall, Middlesex (020 8573 5624, www.tapin.co.uk/westint.htm)

Manchester Flower Market

Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester
(0161 234 7556, www.manchester.gov.uk)