

WHITE HOUSE FLOWERS: MAKE A STATEMENT



The WaPo reports that White House Chief florist Nancy Clarke is retiring, after 31 years. The WaPo's most interested in the change this may bring to the style of flower arrangements in the White House—rather than oversized balls of flowers, we may get leaner, more contemporary arrangements.

But observers note her departure allows the Obamas to try some new things.

"Basically what we're looking at is less is more," said Robin Sutliff of Georgetown's Ultra Violet Flowers.

'There are all kinds of ideas for being more progressive."

"When I see flowers at the White House, they all seem to be these big round balls," said Allan Woods, a favorite florist of D.C. decorators. "They're very stiff and formal. The flower look could become looser and more contemporary. It would be fun to see them do more edgy arrangements. On the other hand, it is the White House."

But I'm more interested in the one thing that, Clarke says, has changed the most during her tenure at the White House: the globalization of flower production.

The biggest change? Thirty years ago, the florists were limited to locally grown, seasonal blooms until they started flying in fresh flowers from around the globe. "The whole world opened up," she said.

Yes, the whole world opened up. And with it much needed trade for developing countries, along with some absolutely horrible conditions for the workers in those countries. Most notably, Colombia, which has grown to become the world's second-biggest flower exporter (after the Netherlands). Over that time, workers have been fighting for some protection from some of the abuse—exposure to toxic pesticides, insecure working conditions, and repetitive work injuries. This video, *Poisoned Flowers*, portrays both the problem and the progress—largely in response to European pressure—towards certifying some of the flowers based on the work conditions used in production.

Michelle Obama set a great example by starting an organic White House garden. This is another area where she can make a statement (particularly against the background of ongoing discussions of a Colombian trade pact): pick a new edgier florist. But also pick one who will use only flowers that are certified to have been grown and processed under conditions that are safe for the workers.