

GROWERTALKS

Columns

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Are Boxes and Common Carriers “Plant Pests”?

Paul Westervelt

Everybody has a story or 12 of a shipment gone terribly wrong. My favorite is of several boxes of hellebores shipped cross-country to us several years ago. The boxes arrived a little worse for wear and thoroughly bundled in tape, but had mostly maintained their intended shape. We signed, took them up to the greenhouse, cut the tape and began unpacking.

Hellebores are tough, but these plants had clearly been beaten to pieces in transit. The plugs were big and very wet, which made them much heavier than usual and resulted in repeated mashing in transit. I took pictures and was generally grumbly until I got to that fateful box—the most thoroughly taped box I’d ever seen before or since. The plants in the top were as mashed as those in other boxes, but when I removed the soggy divider that separated the top flat from the one on the bottom, I was looking at the bottom of a plug tray. Could it have bounced around so much in transit that the whole tray flipped over inside the box? No way, not enough room. As we lifted it out, we saw an envelope in the bottom of the box. It was a credit card statement and it turns out to have been the statement of an employee of the shipping company. Not the vendor, the carrier.

I should tell you that this box was one of those where the plants are supposed to hold the bottom closed. We finally put it all together. The soggy plants had caused the bottom of the box to give way. When the plug tray fell out, a well intentioned employee of the carrier flipped the box on its head, put the tray in right side up not realizing the box was upside down and taped the box so that it couldn’t fall open again—but not before his credit card statement fell inside. In that configuration, whether the box was right side up or upside down, plants on one side or the other would always be mashed. It was perfect in its awfulness.

In this pest and disease issue, I thought it might be humorous to consider boxes and common carriers as “plant pests.” It’s dark and humid in a box often for days on end and with temperature extremes. That’s hard enough without also being tossed and smushed. In moments of extreme frustration, I’ve wondered if carriers don’t get some joy out of bare rooting my plugs without opening the box. They certainly damage the plants in a way that impacts quality, but while they deserve their share of blame for the damage they inflict, I think it’s not entirely their fault. How else can I explain vendors who ship via the same carriers, but rarely have any damage? I assume every vendor thinks they have the best boxing system for their plants, but after 10 years of

receiving boxed shipments from scores of vendors, one has consistently been better than the rest for us and that's Jolly Farmer.

I have no idea how many different-sized inserts Jolly Farmer uses, but each insert perfectly fits the plugs it surrounds, keeping them snug without mashing them. The water level is just enough to sustain the plants in transit without making the box soggy or the plants moldy. Their boxes tell you which end to open to find names on flats and they even manage the elusive doublewide box that doesn't collapse in the middle. We often receive plants from vendors much closer in much worse condition. If you're contemplating a new boxing system, you should have a look at theirs.

I wish you warm days, cool nights, sunny weekends and damage-free plants. **GT**

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