

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Thanks to Irma, Caladiums Supply is Tight

Chris Beytes

Hurricane Irma didn't just flatten greenhouses, shadehouses and crops; she also flooded the caladium fields of Central Florida, where most of the world's caladiums come from. And thanks to that, there's a report that there's a "significant" caladium bulb shortage this year.

That's the word from caladium grower/expert Terri Bates, whose family has been in the business in Lake Placid, Florida, since 1945, when her grandfather Emmett returned home from the war.

"Yes, there is a significant caladium bulb shortage this year," Terri replied when GrowerTalks emailed her about rumors of a shortage. "We had a direct hit from Irma (both sides of the eye wall), which caused flooding and wind damage to the plants. About four weeks later, we were hit by a tropical system that dropped 7 in. [of rain] in one day and the fields flooded again."

Combine that with delays to harvesting and it adds up to about a 35% decline in supply for Bates Sons & Daughters, she says. But they're working hard to make sure regular customers who got their orders in will get what they need. Alas, no new orders or additions are being accepted.

"It is a challenging year," Terri concluded, adding in her usual good humor, "My phone does not stop ringing and my ears hurt."

More than just the hurricane

And more than just caladiums. The citrus industry has taken a hit, too, says Bob Hartman of Classic Caladiums in Avon Park, about 30 miles north of Lake Placid. Bob sent a letter to customers January 29 that stated, in part:

Similar to the devastating hurricane season of 2004, 2017 was not kind to Florida agriculture. USDA, for instance, is predicting a 30% to 50% reduction to the citrus harvest because of Hurricane Irma. Similarly, the caladium industry was not spared the ravages of Mother Nature. Last spring, right at the end of the planting season, we experienced 22 inches of rain in 18 days resulting in widespread flooding and stand losses due to recently planted seed pieces drowning.

On September 10 and 11, Hurricane Irma ravaged with four hours of sustained winds in excess of 110 miles per hour, tearing across central Florida and dropped between 15 and 18 inches of rain in less than 24 hours. September and early October are the most important bulb sizing months. The winds and rains of Irma caused a cessation of bulb sizing.

The result, he says, will not just be fewer bulbs, but also smaller bulbs, and so some substitutions might have to be made. Such as four #2 bulbs or two #1 bulbs in a 6-in. pot instead of one jumbo bulb. Bob says the cost per pot will work out about the same.

So, the message? Appreciate your caladiums (and your caladium suppliers). And make sure your customers do, too! **GT**