

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

8/1/2021

What's "Normal" for the Houseplant Industry?

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The contracts have been fulfilled. The spring semis are gone. The long hours have been put in and it shows.

Looking across the greenhouse this year I have very mixed emotions on seeing such a vast empty space. Growing up in the foliage industry in the late '80s and '90s, our material wasn't readily used as annual exterior center pieces up north, so there was no crazy spike in sales through Weeks 12 to 18. The foliage crops and inputs were much easier to plan with very ritualistic week-to-week purchases from wholesale florists and interiorscapers, along with those garden centers who might have an indoor plants section.

With so many "new plant shops" in today's market, the question on many brick-and-mortar retailers' lips is, "What's the normal cycle and what should I expect in the months to come? Will there be a plateau in the market?"

Everything has a cycle, whether annual or five years. To try and answer that question, I can only share pre-COVID knowledge completely excluding 2020 as the outlier.

Weeks 1 to 3 have historically been strong due to garden centers and interiorscapers clearing out the holiday plant material and retooling their inventory with interior houseplants for customers through the dead of winter. The beauty of something green in your home or office is most appreciated by those far north who only see a color palette of white, brown and black outside for the first three months of the year.

Weeks 4 to 7, of course, is driven by Valentine's Day. Houseplants haven't always been seen as popular V-Day items, but anything with bloom will have a good shot at selling. Houseplants that generally do well are anthuriums, spath and orchids, along with other smaller 3- to 6-in. material used for floral baskets. There WILL be an anthurium shortage for February 2022. Four- to 6-in. anthuriums are all produced from tissue culture. Once the liner is planted, they'll have an eight- to 12-month grow time, depending on variety. V-Day crops had to compete with the crazy late spring sales of 2021 for space and resources. Unless something big happens to curb the typical demand, these items will be lacking in supply.

Weeks 12 to 24 are the big spring rush, where sales will rise and normal interior houseplant sales will compete for the same plant product as northern outdoor color annual sales. It's hard for us as growers to see exactly which category we're selling into, since many garden centers do both interior houseplant and exterior color bowl sales. This is the peak of season for all sales, regardless of type of business.

Weeks 27 to 35 (July 4 through August) historically are the slowest part of the year. Families are busy on vacations and kids are home. Schedules are a wreck, which decreases local walking traffic through garden centers. Most

nurseries in Florida are busy doing maintenance and retooling for heavier fall plantings.

Weeks 36 to 44 kids are back in school. The vacations are over. Sales begin to steadily increase on houseplants from now until the first week of December, when stores will focus on holiday plant products like poinsettias and Christmas cactus.

I mentioned at the beginning the possibility of a softening houseplant market. The cost of plant product is finally influencing demand. We've had several customers mention an industry-wide wholesale price increase in the month of June. This has squished the margins of retail sales to the point of readjusting retail and online price points.

Some companies' future forecasts have shown a decrease in product sales due to the increased retail price point. This reality of economics has been coming for some time. We're not selling Tickle-Me-Elmos on Christmas Eve (even though it's felt like that for the past 18 months). Increasing the quality of product must happen to justify increased retail cost in a plateauing market. The customer's enthusiasm for buying houseplants can be held with the "WOW" factor of better-quality product.

The market must become more competitive on quality to justify the higher wholesale cost. This phase of the market cycle is a great thing for our industry. Better-quality product will follow through to the end retail customer, which in turn will have a better houseplant experience. Wholesalers and garden centers will extend sales to those nurseries who are willing to put the correct amount of time and effort into growing higher quality plants.

In closing, once again my dad Theo Bryant's words of wisdom ring through my brain: "There isn't always a market for houseplants, but there's always a market for quality houseplants." **GT**

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