

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Caladium Capital Woes

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Down in sunny central Florida is a small town named Lake Placid that's known as the "Caladium Capital of the World." There are fields of beautiful bulb caladiums situated on the south side of Lake Istokpoga. This was where the lake's flood plain resided before canals were made and dried the area into usable farmland. The soil is tremendously rich, and for decades, families have made a living growing bulb caladiums.

I've always thought of the area as Florida's little Holland. When either driving through or flying over the area, it's reminiscent of Amsterdam's fields of tulip bulb production. The dark black soil and sharp bright color contrast of the caladium leaves present a beautiful picture. The caladium is a magnificent plant that offers big foliage color faster than any annual could. When grown in the yard or as a potted container, it's a simple plant with minimal requirements for maintenance. When fertilized and watered correctly, the plants run through their normal vegetative cycle of growth followed by a multiplication of bulbs that expands the root base. It's fun to collect these bulbs, to hold over winter and then re-plant the next year—ensuring a quick repeat of bright color in the landscape.

As with every segment of agriculture, our old nemesis Mother Nature has dealt these caladium farms in central Florida a hard blow this past year. A shortage in the bulb market will become clear soon, as garden centers and nurseries who annually order bulbs for spring plantings will be noticeably cut short on orders or turned away all together. Bulb harvest counts are at an all-time low, with some farms recording as high as 80% loss due to multiple weather factors. The combination of drought and hurricane through the past year's growing season has put some of these farmers on the edge of ruin.

The process of growing bulbs via multiplication seems rather easy in a single bed or pot situation. However, when we look at the commercial setting of mass planting hundreds of acres of a homogeneous species, the pest and disease pressure become much higher. A rather simple process becomes a complicated task. There's a lot of early land preparation followed by continual pest and fungus management needed when commercially producing bulbs.

A few of the pests and diseases that affect these crops are nematodes, *Fusarium solani*, *Rhizoctonia solani*, *Sclerotium rolfsii*, *Pythium spp.* along with *Xanthomonas axonopodis* and, of course, the Dasheen mosaic virus. My University of Florida pathology professor Dr. Zettler would smile from ear to ear when describing most of these dastardly foes. With the love of this industry also comes respect for these diseases. Pathogens often pop up on weakened, stressed plants as a secondary infection from a previous event.

April to June found this area of Florida in an unusual drought. This is the time of year the caladium grower gears up for seed bulb planting, then followed by the bulk of vegetative growth. It's super important to have these plants pushing hard to start the multiplication process. Much of the later part of the season is simply sizing the bulbs up to a marketable size.

It's hard to account what percent of loss was due to this drought versus the next catastrophic event, Hurricane Ian. This late-season storm followed the same path as Hurricane Charlie in 2004. The eye of the storm came directly over our facility in Zolfo Springs, which put Lake Placid on the northeastern quadrant of the storm. This isn't a pretty place to be, as the winds peaked over 100 mph. Although the bulb crop was safe underground, the tops of these plants were ravaged by the high winds and pelting rain. This means that the sizing of the bulbs would halt due to the massive amount of stress placed on the plant tops from tattered leaves. Numerous breaks on the leaves and stems allowed entry points for some the earlier listed diseases.

So where does this leave the Florida caladium bulb industry for the future? Changes will have to happen to make this industry more sustainable for the farmer. Improvements were made where control is possible. Some growers are already installing pivot irrigation systems to supplement water for future years where drought conditions occur. Better forms of disaster insurance are needed where liabilities aren't covered.

Some farmers may not have enough bulb seed stock to replant for next year's crop. It'll be a precise balance between selling enough bulbs to cover next year's replanting cost while retaining enough seed stock to replant.

Prices will have to go up next year on caladium bulbs. I asked a couple growers what they thought that would look like. It's a bit early to say with some companies still tallying up their total 2023 harvest. However, I think it's safe to say the increase will be substantial. Even with price increases, it will take years to recoup what's been lost this year.

Be patient with the shortages, as next year will still be recovery mode in getting more acreage back into production with seed stock. As with every segment of our horticulture industry, these farmers are resilient folks. The recovery will come, and hopefully, years from now they'll look back at 2023 as a strong pivot point in the industry that spurred new practices, which made their market more sustainable in production, as well as more profitable with new efficiencies. **GT**

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