

GROWERTALKS

Web Exclusive

Acres Online

Chris Beytes

Hurricane Charley—how are growers doing?

While we were discussing the onset of fall in the Midwest in this e-mail last week, Florida was bracing for the onslaught of Hurricane Charley, which made landfall on the state's Gulf Coast about 30 miles west-northwest of Ft. Myers, with sustained winds of 140 mph. It exited the state a few hours later about 10 miles south of Daytona Beach.



While residents suffered major damage (\$7.4 billion in estimated insurance payouts, second behind Andrew in cost), the nursery industry was spared a direct hit like it suffered in 1992 when Andrew hit Homestead. I talked to Ben Bolusky, executive vice president of the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA) to get a damage report. After visiting five hard-hit counties, Ben says they estimate the damage to Florida's nursery industry at as much as \$200 million, including lost crops. He and other agriculture industry representatives met with Governor Bush yesterday to discuss state and federal assistance.

The first Florida grower I heard from after the storm was Terri Bates Cantwell of Bates Son & Daughters Caladiums in Lake Placid. The eye of the storm passed within 30 miles of them. Here's her e-mail:

We had minimal damage to our facility. We lost a small greenhouse, poly from another, and a few old shadehouses. There are some trees down, but none fell on any structures. Power was restored to most of Lake Placid Tuesday morning. I do not currently have power at my home and probably won't until next week. The traffic lights, gas stations, and grocery stores became operational on Tuesday, Aug 17 also.

Lake Placid is in much better shape than the other 2 towns in our county, Sebring and Avon Park. The eye of the storm was about 30 miles away, so we were so very lucky. Cost of the storm is minimal—about four extra days of labor with about eight employees. We wouldn't even have that except that we do all the pots for the Caladium Festival and 10,000 plants had to be moved into the warehouses before the storm. Then, we had to repair anything salvageable in the shadehouses, greenhouses, etc. and move them back out. Our 150 acre caladium farm only received about 2 in. of rainfall because the storm moved so rapidly. Rain was our biggest concern to the crop. Some plants in a 40-acre section are snapped off at the stems, but the tubers are okay and the plants should regrow. We are still under a mandatory curfew in the county because about 70% still does not have power. Gas stations are limiting the amount of gas and will take cash only. School is out for this week and we will know Friday about next week. Overall, we fared great. Nursery operations in Arcadia, Zolfo Springs and Wauchula are badly damaged or completely gone.

According to the FNGLA directory, there are 26 member operations in and around Ft. Myers. One of them is Yoder Brothers, which has three facilities in the area. Yoder's Chris Kelleher sent me an e-mail from Florida Operations Manager Patrick Crump, sent on Saturday after he'd surveyed the damage:

Hurricane Charley hit the Fort Myers area at approx. 3 p.m. on Friday with hurricane force winds and sheets of rain. By 6 p.m. it was all over. The Alva and LOF (Live Oak Farm) farms are still standing! For the strength of the storm, we had minimal damage. At Alva, we lost poly & fiberglass roofs and some saran. The spray tractor roof was a total loss. Power was off from 3:30 p.m. Friday to 1:30 p.m. Saturday. As of 2 p.m. today, all critical systems have been restored. At LOF, we also had damage to poly and fiberglass roofs. Power remained on during and after the storm. The Parrish Farm had minimal wind related damage. Due to the power loss at Alva, there will be some disruption to mum shipping on Monday and Tuesday. Mum unrooted inventory was being moved to a temporary cold storage area until the power was restored. The inventory will need to be relocked and bar code recorded before shipping can resume.

Florida growers: If you have a story to tell about surviving the storm, let me know.

Want to help?

Despite the relatively good news from these two growers, I can only assume that some growers lost everything. If you're interested in offering your help to your fellow growers, FNGLA is coordinating relief efforts. Financial donations will be used to purchase supplies needed to help members get their businesses up and running. General donations needed include:

- * Personal hygiene items, towels, bedding items, inflatable mattresses, work clothes, diapers, wipes.
- * Water, non-perishable foods, can openers, fruit juice drinks, grills, charcoal.
- * Trash bags, heavy black plastic (for makeshift showers), flashlights, batteries, tents, insect repellent.
- * Chainsaws, pruning tools, large and small generators.
- * Shadecloth, poly, tools and materials related to rebuilding shade and poly houses.

If you can help, contact the local FNGLA members who are coordinating the distribution of donations, Carolan Mahr (239-574-2214) and Paul Polomsky (239-353-7256). Financial donations can be mailed to FNGLA, 1533 Park Center Dr., Orlando, FL 32835. Please indicate that the donation is for Hurricane Charley Relief.

What about independents?

Got this critical e-mail from a reader this week:

Received my Acres Online. You talk about what's in and what's not in the local box stores. The question was raised, "Where are the fall annuals—the pansies, the snaps, the dianthus, the ornamental cabbage, the fall mixed containers?" My only comment is, Check your local independent. You'll find the product, in good health, with employees ready to help their customers extend their season. Am I the only one feeling forgotten?

Point taken. But lest you think I'm a fan of the boxes at the expense of the indies, let me reassure you that I shop more independents on a typical weekend (4-6 sometimes, following my wife around) than most consumers do all spring. It just happens that there are five big boxes (and a Franks) within 10 minutes of my office and only two independents, one of which is closed in the summer. So I'm just shopping where the typical consumer in my area shops, and I'm reporting on what they see for sale. To be fair, yesterday I stopped by the second independent, Heinz Brothers in St. Charles, and I found summer to still be in full swing. They had a tower of fresh garden mums, but

thankfully, that was the only sign of autumn. And when fall hits, I know Heinz Brothers will have that wide selection and great service you talk about.

Speaking of service, or lack thereof, my boss told me about her recent adventure buying some landscape blocks at a big box store. The service was horrible. She wasn't even offered any help from an employee standing right there, so she and her young daughter had to wrestle the stones to the register and to her car herself. I don't think she'll be patronizing that retailer again anytime soon.

Bedding Plant Conference sign-up

Now's the time to sign up for the 2004 International Bedding Plant Production Conference, slated for September 20-23. The hotel room block is going fast, as are spots on our numerous tour buses. If you've been to GrowerExpo, our International Plug & Cutting Conference, or last year's Perennial Production Conference, you know that it will be the talked-about event of the year. Go to <http://www.ballpublishing.com/conferences> for information and to register.

Finally ... speaking of critical e-mails

The compliments I get for Acres Online are immensely gratifying. But they're almost always prefaced with, "I was going to send you a reply about something, but I figured you already got too many e-mails."

Nothing could be further from the truth. I get responses, yes, but not nearly as many as I'd like. So if you read something that strikes a chord or pushes a button, hit "reply" and tell me what you think.

As always, see you next time,

Chris Beytes

Editor

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