

GROWERTALKS

Web Exclusive

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Last time, I asked you for names of grocery chains that do a good job retailing bedding plants. I got just ONE reply. That either says you're swamped, or that there's only one grocery chain doing a good job retailing bedding plants-- and I have a hard time believing that.

The reply I got came from a supplier to Meijer, a Midwest chain with about 150 stores. Now, we've got Meijer stores in Chicagoland, and they do a decent job with bedding. But Meijer stores are full-on supercenters, with a garden department, lawnmowers, jewelry, underwear, shoes, DVD players and paint. To me, that's no more a grocery store than a Wal-Mart Supercenter is a grocery store. So I'm still looking for *grocery chains* that do a good job with bedding. (I must say my local Jewel stores with their pop-up hoop houses have looked pretty good this spring. We'll see how they weathered the frosty temperatures.)

Speaking of cold ...

When garden centers are caught by surprise and have to scramble to cover up their impatiens, salvia and vinca, that's a problem. Yet that's just what's been happening in the Midwest the last few nights. A Home Depot merchandiser from National Color Network even made the 10 p.m. news as an expert on frost protection! A quick drive past two garden centers this morning showed lots of flapping fabric over the racks and tables. We avoided freezing temperatures, but I've already seen plenty of sad-looking warm-weather annuals that aren't appreciating the 45F days and 35F nights. I trust they'll be tossed by the time gardeners get serious about gardening in the next couple weeks....

Some stats from USDA

The Department of Agriculture just released its annual Floriculture Crops Summary, says Dr. Marvin Miller, resident stats expert over at Ball Horticultural. Dr. Miller reports that the wholesale value of floriculture crops in 2004 was up 1.9% from 2003. For growers with at least \$100,000 in sales, the year-to-year growth increased 2.5%.

However, "suggesting that industry consolidation continues," Dr. Miller says, grower numbers dropped 7.5% from 2003 to 2004. The number of growers reporting sales of \$100,000 or more dropped by 153 to 4,579. And production space is down, too.

The Bedding/Garden Plants category leads our industry's growth, with a 4.5% increase from 2003. Within that category, perennials outpaced annuals, 8.2% to 3.2%, between 2003 and 2004. Perennials now account for 27.1% of all bedding/garden sales. Overall, bedding/garden plants accounted for 56.3% of the total finished sales reported in the USDA *Floriculture Crops: 2004 Summary*. Dr. Miller will crunch all the data in the July *GrowerTalks*.



A Christmas present from Europe?

If you're in the *schlumbergera* or *riphsalidopsis* (Christmas or Easter cactus) business, take note: APHIS is proposing to allow Danish and Dutch growers to ship them into the United States in approved growing media. Those two countries have asked for the change in the regulations, and APHIS says they've determined that it won't result in the introduction or spread of any pests or noxious weeds, so they've opened up a 60-day comment period.

If you grow these, should you be worried about a flood of imports? History says no--there are already 10 genera allowed into the United States in approved media, such as *alstroemeria*, *begonia*, *gloxinia*, ferns, *peperomia*, *rhododendron* and African violet, but as far as I know, no growers, foreign or domestic, are taking advantage of the relaxed regulations. Presumably the production restrictions and inspections are too rigid and shipping costs are too high. But might it be different for holiday cactus? It's hard to picture them not losing their buds during shipping. And they're not a high-dollar item, either. Regardless, if you want to comment, you've got until June 27. Go to <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppd/rad/webrepor.html> for more.

A new "Q" whitefly on the loose?

A couple of e-mails have come across my desk about a new strain, or "biotype," of whitefly that's been reported in Arizona and California. Called the "Q" biotype, it's native to the Mediterranean, and is present in Europe, Japan and China. It's apparently virtually identical to common whiteflies except that it appears to be slightly more resistant to chemicals we use here in the States, according to researchers who've used new molecular technology from the University of Arizona to identify this whitefly. Inspectors in Arizona and California will begin watching more closely for this particular strain.

Finally ...

This e-mail, from George Mitchell of The Flower Farm, Millville, New Jersey, is timed perfectly for the cold spring weather much of the country, not just the Midwest, has been suffering:

I share your concern about selling bedding too early. Some of our independents and all the boxes have been selling tender annuals in our area for over two weeks. My concern is that the uninformed gardener will have problems, and that can impact the future. We make it a practice of telling any customer who tries to buy too early what the options are. After this approach for so many years we spend a lot of time answering the question, "Is it time yet?" We feel this is a moral obligation to the folks who support us. It pays dividends long term.

This next e-mail, from bulb expert Dr. Bill Miller of Cornell, points out another sales opportunity that some growers, such as Ivy Acres on Long Island and Andy Mast Greenhouses in Michigan, have been capitalizing on for years:

Your column points out a major opportunity for growers: Selling "spring bulbs" as sprouted plants that can be

dropped into the ground immediately. What better "eye-of-mouth" advertising than all the existing spring bulbs in your neighborhood gardens? The techniques to get sprouted bulbs available for spring sales are well known, and savvy garden centers could undoubtedly capitalize on the early spring color to drive early sales. For growers the benefits are also apparent. Most of these items require no greenhouse time at all, and go from the cooler directly to the garden center.

Unfortunately, Bill, nothing blooms out more quickly on the retail shelf, either. By the way, I love that "eye-of-mouth" advertising line!

Lastly, my friend Janet Kister of Sunlet Nursery in Fallbrook, California, commented on one of the trends I wrote about last week:

Your comments regarding taller vases and containers and how consumers want height instead of width intrigued me. When growers have packaged flowering plants in the taller, narrow pots for supermarkets here in Southern California, the sell through was just okay. I figured it was a European trend that didn't quite catch the consumer's eye, though I was never sure why. On a recent trip to Japan I saw the same tall, narrow style everywhere and finally asked a grower there why he thought it was so popular in his country. He replied simply, "There's not enough room in the Japanese household, so the only direction we can go is up!" Although that may not be the case in this country, the only way we'll know for sure what the consumer wants is to ask them. Thanks for making us think more about these things!

Two points: First, note that I didn't say tall and narrow, I said taller than they are wide. There's a difference. I don't think tall and narrow necessarily flies here, either.

Second, you're right! Let's ask them! And the place to do that is at a Consumer Buzz Live Presented by *Green Profit*. We're doing three this summer: at Super Floral Show (June 24 in Houston), the OFA Short Course (July 12 in Columbus) and the Perennial Plant Association Symposium (July 20 in Knoxville). We'll have real, live consumers on stage telling us what they think about our industry--what they buy, why they buy--and most importantly, why they don't buy. Don't miss it!

See you next time,
Chris

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