

GROWERTALKS

Features

1/15/2010

Containers: Sorting Out Size Demands

GrowerTalks Staff



Growers

David Keeler, Jolly Farmer, New Brunswick, Canada

Pack Sizes: After several years trending away from the 806 pack towards the 606 pack, we saw a counter trend last year back towards the 806. Pack price is certainly the driving factor.

Over the last several years, I would say sales of premium vegetative annuals have increased, relative to seed-started annuals. This would indicate more planting into containers by the end user, less into the ground, and could also be stated as a change for the producer from smaller containers (packs) to larger pots needed to finish the vegetative product.

Hanging Baskets: Over the last several years, we've gone from growing 8- and 10-in. to growing 10- and 12-in. baskets. Demand for our 12-in. always exceeds supply, in spite of my best attempts to balance supply/demand by increasing supply and pricing.

As a wholesale grower in a rural area, we face significant transportation costs on large containers marketed in metro areas. This also pushes our production towards smaller pot and planter sizes. We provide lots premium flowering plants and accent plants for "make your own" containers.

I think the trend is toward larger pots, containers and hangers—our sales of the component plants, as well as the larger 12-in. hangers have been strong. Grower-retailers, I believe, are in an even better position to capitalize on this trend. Garden centers with a good designer on staff can also benefit by planting containers and hangers on the spot.

Deb Bettinger, Bettinger Farms, Swanton, Ohio

We stay with the 12- and 16-in. pots. It seems to be what our customers want. I have asked and they said the sizes we carry are good. They are the people talking to the end consumers.

Grower-Retailers

JoAnn Delaney, Delaney Farms, Onondaga, New York

Our annuals are produced in either 4½-in. pots or 6-in. pots. We plan to keep these pots sizes—quality of the plants is the reason, plus we've been able to get the price we need.

Combination planters are produced in 8-, 10- and 12-in. sizes. They didn't sell as well in 2008 and 2009 as they had in past years. Our combination planters are premade, and we plan to reduce production across all sizes by 40%.

Custom-made combination planters [sales] have been steady. We plan to produce whatever is ordered for custom combination planters. Sales of custom planters were up about 5% in 2009 over 2008.

Maria Kreidermacher, Pork & Plants, Altura, Minnesota

We have a pretty diverse retail customer—the “instant color/bigger is better” group and the price-sensitive group. We know our prices aren't the cheapest, but we get feedback that even our packs are seen as bigger plants for the money. Over the last five years most of our annual sales have been in 606 packs at \$2.99 (seed items) for the price-sensitive and 5- to 6-in. pots at \$4.99 to \$5.99 (vegetative or higher-price seed items) for the instant color customers. Of course the price-sensitive customers requested a way to get some of the unique (vegetative) items in a cheaper size or configuration, so we grew some in 4-in. pots at \$3.99 and gave a price break on multiples of six for \$19.99. We found this moderately successful in 2007 and 2008, but it wasn't as easy to produce these same products in smaller containers and many customers would rather buy larger pots or get them at a lower price.

We've grown Waves in 306 packs for years, so in 2009 we changed tactics and grew a larger number of premium seed items in 306 packs at \$9.99 to \$11.99. We had items such as Serena angelonia, bacopa and seed geraniums as a value alternative to the 5- and 6-in. vegetative products, as well as seed items like Swizzle zinnias and Nonstop begonias. We found it very successful, so we will be expanding the assortment. For 2010 we're growing 606 and 306 packs for the price sensitive customers and 5- and -6-in. pots for instant color customers.

Bruce Benson, Benson's Farm, Missoula, Montana

Looking back it's obvious that Wave and vegetative cutting plants were a key to the current market. In the early '90s, the aggressiveness of these plants led to huge containers.

We tried moss-lined wire baskets, then large fiber, and now the #10 Anderson with Iron Gallery hangers (commonly known as City Baskets). While these make spectacular displays, not everyone has a place to hang these monsters. Customers still want something new. Straight fuchsia and ivy geranium basket sales are declining. For smaller baskets it's a challenge to figure the balance of plants that will look good for the whole season. Trials of the Trixi-Liners, Kwik Kombos and Confetti liners are in line for this spring.

There still is a market for the “classic” dracaena, red geranium and vinca vine planter. Other plants come and go so there is a constant trial keeping the mix interesting. We use a mix of containers from 36-in. fiber to small ceramic. The most common size we sell is 15-in. plastic. The challenge is to find plant material that will look good in a small container for the whole season. Interesting succulents are becoming available that appear to work in this situation.

Garden Centers

Lori Harms, Countryside Flower Shop, Nursery & Garden Center, Crystal Lake, Illinois

While the trend for the last five years had been for bigger and larger pots and plants, this last year we found people downsizing in everything. Our sales in the 12-in. and 16-in. hanging baskets went down and the demand for 10-in. baskets went up, primarily due to price points.

The same held for 6-in. annuals vs. 4½-in. in that customers seemed reluctant to spend the extra money on the larger plants, instead opting to buy the smaller, less expensive size. Annual flat sales were steady but the sales of individual packs went up as consumers filled their containers with plant material from packs rather than individual pots.

The price point for sales on pre-made container gardens fell from an average of \$89 and \$59 down to \$59 and \$39. This held true for holiday planters over the Christmas season as well.

Rita Randolph, Randolph's Greenhouses, Jackson, Tennessee

We offer paper product and plastic liners planted up in all sizes for our container gardening displays, trying not to actually plant the higher-priced containers but plant a liner for them that can be lifted out. Many folks already own a set number of nice pots, and planted liners that just drop in were noticeably popular for the last year or two. They can purchase the liner or pot alone. And when folks are on a budget, these cost less than a planted ceramic pot. We still sell high-end containers because of the high quality, just not quite as many as a few years ago.

Edward Knapp, Americas Best Flowers Garden Center, Cottage Grove, Wisconsin

We see the trend towards larger custom containers. Our pack sales have stayed about the same over the years, and pots were down slightly in 2009. Baskets were about the same.

Combination planters seem to be growing in sales every year. They're easier for the consumer to water, and last longer than baskets. Many of the larger plants just need to be mixed with other plants to look their best. One thing we have done in the last few years is a fair amount of 7- and 10-gal. nursery cans of mixed plants displayed in pottery. Most of these containers are 3 to 4 ft. tall and wouldn't be shippable. We price them at \$59 to \$89, depending on type and size of plants.

Caren Bower, Woodley's Garden Center, Columbia, South Carolina

Customers are still purchasing the large pottery (24-in. and larger) for year-round planting of annuals and perennials. Customers are looking at containers that are different and have new shapes and designs. I don't feel the sales of these are down as customers are painting the yards with color through container gardens to brighten up their lives in these slow economic times. A little color lifts the spirits up. We all still love self-satisfaction. I have noticed that they do purchase the smaller, cheaper plants to fill these containers.

Many customers are looking for pots suitable for combination herb/veggie gardens which are more the shorter bowl style (24-in.) or shorter square and oblong. Pottery that is being purchased is that which has interest in shape—different from the typical round.

At this time of the year we find customers leaning toward smaller containers, 14 to 18 in., packed with color to

brighten up their porches to impress the seasonal visitor. I notice they're buying several of these at a time to make a good impact, to get them through the winter period. These containers would be mostly cheaper plastic. Violas are becoming more popular than the pansy, as they do give a larger impact of color than a pansy does in a small space. Holly, ferns and cast iron have been big sellers as thrillers with ivy being the most popular spiller followed by prostrate rosemary. Smaller porch pots have sold better this season than last year.

Strawberry pots aren't just for strawberries but are being used for herbs and annuals. Therefore, customers are looking for strawberry planters with larger-size cups. Customers have shown interest in pottery of all sizes that have holes in the sides. Overall, I have seen interest in pottery that has different shapes, designs and styles than the regular round conventional style.

Phyllis Williams, K&W Greenery, Edgerton, Wisconsin

Last year, I expect due to the struggling economy, we saw the return of the cell pack. After years of the "do it for me" and "do it now," it turned out that "do what I can afford" trumped them all. This year, I expect more of the same, due to the slow recovery. **GT**