

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Easter Lilies: Hot or Not?

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Sean Schaefer of Schaefer's Greenhouses checks over one of the 15,000 Easter lilies growing at his family's wholesale/retail operation in Montgomery, Illinois. Sean's second cousin Mike has been in charge of the Easter lily crop since he was 21 years old; he estimates he has 35 crops under his belt. We asked him about the Easter lily sales trend at Schaefer's.

"It's held its own for about the last five years," Mike answers, "but that's down from 20,000 pots six or seven years ago." That was also the heyday of lily production at Schaefer's, when Mike

grew 22,000 pots.

"After that we got greedy, because we kept bumping the numbers up, and then I ate some," he says with a laugh." So [15,000] is where we're at now, and we've been holding at that." Customers are primarily churches and a few large florists. "Even up in our store they're not as popular as they used to be."

In New York, Joe Simone, president and CEO of Fred C. Gloeckner & Company, one of America's "major players" in Easter lily bulbs, calls demand "fairly stable. There was probably a decline two or three years ago to the level of today, but it's pretty stable right now."

Rob Miller of Dahlstrom & Watt Bulb Farm in Smith River, California, is one of just four lily bulb producers left in the U.S. (he says there were 26 in 1970). He too says demand, while off from about a decade ago, remains stable. Rob estimates total U.S. bulb production at between 11 million and 11.5 million units (he wouldn't reveal D&W's numbers). "We're certainly not growing in per-capita consumption," Rob says of the domestic market, "but we're not losing ground in the total number being sold."

According to the USDA Floriculture Crop Summary, in 2010, 292 growers produced 6.39 million pots (in the top 15 production states). Compare that to 2000, when those same 15 states produced 8.76 million pots. Rob thinks that decline came when UPC scan records revealed to retailers how many plants were going into the trash.

The biggest development in Easter lilies of late? The chemical Fascination. "There's no question, Fascination is a wonder drug," says Rob. "It's solved huge keeping-quality issues." **GT**