Impatiens: What to Do?

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That question is on everybody’s mind this season. With the recent outbreaks of impatiens downy mildew (verified in 33 states and the District of Columbia, last I heard), flats, pots and baskets of good old Impatiens walleriana, the bread and butter, the staple, the foundation, the go-to, gimme, no-brainer bedding plant of the 20th Century are no longer the safe-bet sellers they once were.

Or are they?

Therein lies the rub: Should you cut back impatiens production or sales? If so, by what percent?

What I’m hearing from sales and technical folks who regularly visits greenhouses is that, if you’re in one of those regions hit hard by IDM, you’re thinking about cutting back on your impatiens 20% or 40% or 60% or even cutting them out completely. After all, why run the risk of customer disappointment and returned flats of dead plants?

But then again, cutting back is also risky. What if customers want impatiens anyway and you don’t have any, so they buy them from the guy down the street? Or what if IDM doesn’t rear its ugly head this season and you’re caught short on impatiens?

A conundrum, to be sure.

As usual, I don’t have any answers for you, just some food for thought to help you weigh your options.

My first bit of advice is to not worry about what other businesses are doing. Their decisions may be brilliant or foolish. They may be based on reams of detailed spreadsheets … or a Ouija board at a midnight séance. How are you to know if Nurseryman Bob’s decision to cut back 35% (except whites, which he’s cutting back 25%) is right for you?

No, I suggest you do what’s best for your customers, based on your own math, science or gut instinct.
My second thought is that we should look at this as an opportunity to greatly expand our shade gardening alternatives. A story was related to me recently that illustrates my point.

Back in the day, we had one pesticide: DDT. And it was very effective. It was said that when a young chemist went to his boss with a new pesticide chemistry, the boss would say, “That’s wonderful. Except we have DDT.” The young chemist would go back to the test tubes and eventually deliver an even better new chemistry. “Fabulous!” said his boss. “Except we have DDT.” The point being, DDT was so effective, nobody needed or wanted anything else.

Until Rachel Carson wrote “Silent Spring,” that is. Once DDT was off the market, the door was opened to a plethora of new products.

When it comes to successful shade annuals, we can look at Impatiens walleriana the same way: The consumer hasn’t needed to try anything else because what they’ve been using is so good. If we find sales of impatiens dropping, we can use that to our advantage, as customers will be actively seeking alternatives.

But taking advantage of this opportunity requires two things: 1) Identifying the alternatives and, 2) teaching consumers what they are and how to use them.

The first is easy. Every publication, breeding company and distributor has been publishing lists of what works in the shade. Companies that offer shade plants have been marketing them with renewed vigor. Our own Dr. Marvin Miller has become an enthusiastic proponent of the combination of coleus, dusty miller and caladiums in his personal shade beds.

The second is where we as an industry tend to fall down. It’s not enough to stock shade alternatives or to tape a list of them to your service counter. You need a display of individual options, plus interesting combinations like Marvin’s. And you must provide the necessary cultural information and handholding to make your customers successful. That could be seminars, POP or one-on-one counseling.

Actually, there’s one final challenge: price. Flats of impatiens are “cheap and cheerful.” The typical 6-in. pots of vegetative alternatives like New Guineas, coleus and caladiums are cheerful … but not so cheap. The breeder or grower who can develop a program of 1801 vegetative annuals could have a leg up in overcoming consumer sticker shock.

I can leave you with one certainty: Impatiens WILL be in demand this spring. As will alternatives to impatiens. If you don’t provide both, your competition will.