

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Plant to Plan ... But Then Adjust?

Chris Beytes



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It's March and your season has started (down south) or is about to (much of the rest of America) or is still somewhere out beyond the snow drifts (Frostbite Falls and the Yukon), and all of the opportunities to carefully plan your strategy for 2025 are done and behind you. It's too late now to fix things.

Or is it?

How much can you adjust your plan once the season is rolling?

I bring it up because early in the year I was hearing that growers were being a bit hesitant to commit to ordering, and in many cases, that was because their retail customers were hesitant to commit to booking orders. Which I find amazing,

especially among the big boxes, because I've heard they MUST comp up every year—meaning they have to sell more this year than they did last year—or some merchant's neck will be on the chopping block.

And, really, I was trying to think how grocery or other regional chains or even independents might be different, but when it comes right down to it, everybody needs to make more money this year than they did last year or be slowly going backwards. Even Ball Publishing (interested in advertising? Let me know!).

But back to the topic at hand: If you've gone into the season playing it conservative, and it starts to break super strong—warm weather and sunny skies and suddenly the phone is going off the hook—what can you do to capitalize?

First of all, I'd be in constant contact with my favorite brokers and rooting stations, so I always know what their availability is. Speculation is a thing of the past, but over-sows and canceled orders aren't, and knowing on a weekly basis what's on the availability lists could be just the ticket for filling empty benches.

The same goes for knowing your competition. Now, some of you never talk to the guy down the street, but most of you are good friends with each other. That's the nature of our business. And knowing what someone is long or short on could be useful for both of you. This has long been a big part of what makes horticulture special.

I encountered this my very first season in business. It was the day after Christmas 1983 and we'd just sold out of our first poinsettia crop. Pleased with how it went, I asked Laurie, "What's next?"

"Valentine's Day," she replied ... only, all of our greenhouse space had been taken up by poinsettias and we hadn't brought in any Valentine's flowers. Yikes! What can we do in six weeks? Thankfully, one of our brokers knew of a

grower a couple hours south who had extra pre-finished hydrangeas and azaleas we could buy, and that helped us make the holiday. So don't forget about pre-finished crops!

As you get deeper into the season, it gets harder to turn a crop. But if you can get plugs, you can have finished plants as quickly as two weeks. We ran a story on the topic years ago called "Fourteen-Day Bedding." I'd point you to a link, but this was back in the '90s when there were no digital archives. So to refresh my memory of how to grow 14-day bedding plants, I went straight to the guy who helped it happen, Dr. Will Healy, who's now retired, but is always looking for an excuse to talk about growing plants. Here are his keys to success with 14-day bedding plants:

- Use fully budded 288 plugs with no flowers open, but buds visible. Smaller plugs are not mature enough and will stretch easier.
- Feed plugs with 20-10-20 at 200 ppm N BEFORE transplanting to get them to pop.
- Soil temperature of 68 to 75F (20 to 23C) is key to getting roots to fill out.
- Keep nighttime air temperature at 70F (21C) minimum, and minimize DIF to prevent stretch.
- Apply a light PGR to keep plants compact and green.

As for size, Will says any tray count with 18 cells or more will work. Crops you can grow this way include impatiens, petunias (but not the Wave types), coleus, French marigolds, begonias, celosia, zinnia and, of course, vegetables.

But what if you need quart-sized pots or baskets? Just add more plugs to the pot suggests Will: "As a rule of thumb, adding one to three extra plugs can decrease the crop by about five days per extra plug since you will fill out the container faster—as long as the plugs are initiated."

Of course, the best way to go into every season is with a plan that will allow you to meet your financial goals for the year. But if an opportunity arises, there are a few ways to capitalize if you're prepared. Just don't get so distracted that you lose sight of your original plan. **GT**