GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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What Defines Quality in Plants

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Most folks would say a good plant is the big one. The full one. The one with blooms hanging off it like diamond earrings. The one that looks ready to jump into the cart and make the porch look better by supper. And I get it. We all buy with our eyes first. We're human. We like color. We like size. We like the plant that says, "Take me home and your neighbors will be jealous." But the plant that looks best today may not be the plant that grows best tomorrow.

That's where our industry must look in the mirror a bit. We talk about quality in production all the time. We preach it. We practice it—"garbage in, garbage out." We know a plug that's too old, too weak, too stretched, too stressed or over-regulated with PGRs can make a poor finished plant. We know when a young plant is ready for the next step. We know all this behind the grower curtain. But then we walk out front in retail and show plants to the public that break some of the same rules. Are we selling what the customer wants or what gives that customer the best chance of succeeding? Those aren't always the same plant.

Most retail plant sales start with emotion. A customer walks into a garden center and sees rows of color. Petunias glowing. Geraniums standing proud. Tomatoes ready to make a person dream of sandwiches. They're not thinking about root health or transplant shock. They're not thinking about whether that plant has been over-regulated with PGRs, fed with too much fertilizer or squeezed into a pot until the roots look like a ball of fishing line. They're thinking, "That one looks good." And fair enough. A plant should look good. We're not selling lug nuts or lumber!

Our plants carry hope. Hanging baskets aren't just hanging baskets—it's a prettier porch. Tomato plants aren't just tomato plants—it's a sandwich lunch in July. A flat of flowers isn't just a flat of flowers—it's the front yard looking like somebody loves the place. So, yes, emotion matters.

But emotion can fool us. The biggest plant may not be the best plant. The fullest plant may not be the healthiest plant. The one in full bloom may already be spending more energy than it can afford. A plant can look "finished" on the bench and still be a poor choice for the garden in the long run.
So here are the contradictions that stick in my mind. If an old plug makes a poor finished plant, why would an old finished plant make a great garden plant? If we call an overgrown plug a problem, why do we call an overgrown retail plant "premium"? If we reject poor timing in production, why do we accept poor timing at the cash register?

In the greenhouse, we want plants at the right stage. In retail, we often reward plants that are past the right stage because they look fuller and sell faster. We know a root-bound plant may struggle. We know a plant hit too hard with growth regulators may not bounce back like it should. We know a plant can be made short, tight and pretty while losing some vigor. Yet the market says, “Make it big. Make it full. Make it bloom. Make it now.” So we do. Standards have shifted over time and will continue to shift. Plants that might once have been called overgrown may now be called retail-ready. Plants that might once have been called past prime may now get the best spot on the bench. A plant that’s already used up its best push in the pot may still look great long enough to get sold. That’s market pressure and it’s real.

Retailers need plants that catch the eye and sell fast. Growers need crops that hold and ship well. Customers want instant beauty. Nobody wants to buy a promise when the next cart has fireworks in full bloom. But if we let the market define quality only by what moves fast, we may end up training customers to choose the wrong plant. Then they blame themselves and we act surprised when they don’t try again next year.

Look at landscape beds and you’ll see denser plantings than years past. Landscapers say, “Plants don’t fill in like they used to.” Or “It takes plants forever to fill in.” They say, “Those spacing recommendations aren’t right.” I’ve gotten that call many times and my heart sinks when I hear it. I just wish the conversation would have led with, “The plants aren’t yours.”

So what defines quality? Not just what the consumer wants in the moment. Not just what looks good on retail benches. Not just what blooms first, sells first or fills the cart first. Quality should mean the plant is healthy, timely, suitable for the climate and ready to grow after the sale. It should mean the customer has a fair shot. It should mean we aren’t just moving product. We’re helping people succeed so they return next year and bring their neighbors with them.

The industry knows what quality plants are. We prove that every day in production. We know age matters. Roots matter. Timing matters. Stress matters. So if we know better in production, we ought to send the same quality to retail. A plant shouldn’t be called quality just because it’s easy to sell—it should be called quality because it’s easy to succeed with. That’s the plant worth growing. That’s the plant worth selling. Honestly, that’s the plant the customer wanted all along. They just may not have known how to ask for it. **GT**

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