

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

9/30/2026

Are We Delivering Plants or Hauling Air?

Davy Wright



DAVY WRIGHT

We spend a lot of time talking about growing plants. We talk about labor, pots, fertilizer, water, crop timing and plant quality. Yet there's another part of business that can eat through money just as quickly as a bad crop: It's about how we get those plants to the customer. We have fuel, trucks, drivers, insurance, maintenance and labor. The truck itself isn't cheap, leased or owned. Neither is keeping it on the road.

I've heard people say, "We loaded out 80 trucks this week" or "We made two runs on the same truck in one day" and have seen tons of videos online of nursery deliveries. They always bring my thoughts to one simple question: Are we using all that expensive truck space as well as we could? Over the years, our industry has put a lot of focus on handling plants. Plants are awkward. They are delicate. They have flowers, stems, leaves and branches that we don't want to break. Anything that makes them easier to move deserves a look, right?

But somewhere along the way I think we started mixing up two different things. Handling efficiency isn't the same as transportation efficiency. A system may be easy for the crew to load, but it may also under-utilize a lot of truck space. Fuel costs the same whether every foot of the truck is full or half the truck contains empty space. The driver gets paid the same either way. Insurance doesn't care whether we haul 5,000 plants or 500. Neither does the truck payment. So perhaps we need to stop looking only at how easily we can load a truck and start asking how much value that truck is carrying.

One of the better numbers we could watch is revenue per truck foot per mile traveled. Under-utilized truck space is easy to ignore because there isn't an invoice for it. Nobody sends you a bill marked, "Four feet of underutilized truck space." Or the freight discounted because the truck isn't full. You pay for it all the same. Poor use of truck space can even force us to send another truck. Now we have another driver, another route, more fuel, more wear and another delivery day—all because sellable plants were left sitting on the loading dock.

There's nothing better than seeing a nursery truck arrive on Friday evening with plants stacked from floor to ceiling ... said no one ever. That alone can explain why carts have become so common in our industry. They make plants easier to handle and greatly reduce the amount of labor involved. Instead of picking up every flat or pot several times, plants can be loaded onto carts and rolled from one location to another. Carts also make orders easier to stage, organize and keep together. For some customers, they can make receiving a delivery easier, as well. On paper it

sounds like a great system, and in the right situation, it certainly can be.

Carts also come with a significant cost. They're often left behind at retail locations, which means growers must keep extra carts on hand for the next delivery. The cart frames and wheels themselves take up valuable truck space, and fixed shelf heights can leave large gaps above shorter crops. In some cases, growers even begin growing plants to the cart shelf height, using heavy PGR treatments to keep crops compact enough to fit.

At our nursery, we use carts to pull and stage orders inside the greenhouse. That gives our people the labor benefit of carts where they work well. Then we transfer the plants onto adjustable shelving inside the truck for delivery. That lets us get more sellable plants onto each load while still using carts where they help us most. Is it the perfect system? Probably not. But it works for us because we're trying to balance labor, plant quality, safety and truck capacity.

I tested delivering on carts in 2018 because I wanted to make sure our old way of doing things still made sense. The results caught my attention. We were taking about the same amount of time to load and unload, yet we were carrying about 20% less product per foot of truck space. That's a serious trade-off.

We also found that unloading carts wasn't always as simple as loading them back at the greenhouse. Carts roll. That sounds like an advantage until the customer doesn't have a nice, flat, smooth place for the truck. Those carts quickly become several hundred-pound missiles with a mind of their own.

I've watched drivers from other nurseries spend half an hour rotating carts just to get to the one they needed. And others who simply unloaded every cart on the truck in the parking lot to get to the one they needed. I've seen customers trying to drag carts on gravel to get them to their sales area because the driver had to take them off the truck at the bottom of the hill.

None of this means carts are a bad choice. The real question is whether the convenience they provide is worth the truck space they consume. Saving 10 minutes at the loading dock may seem efficient, but that savings can disappear quickly when we consider the value of the plants that couldn't fit on the truck because of the carts.

As delivery costs continue to rise, even small improvements in truck capacity can have a meaningful impact on profitability. Instead of assuming one system is better than another because everyone else does it, we need to measure the total cost and value of each approach. Every nursery operates differently, so the answer may not be the same for everyone. What matters is knowing what works best for your operation based on actual numbers. **GT**

Davy Wright is COO of Wright's Nursery & Greenhouse in Plantersville, Alabama.