

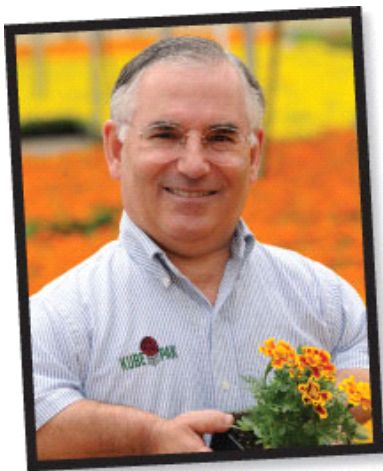
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Why I Stopped Watching the Weather Forecast

Bill Swanekamp



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One year ago to the day, I wrote about the record-breaking 2015 spring season we enjoyed. It was so good I suggested that if we had three or four more of these in a row I might retire.

Well, guess what? It didn't happen. Spring of 2016 turned out to be one of the worst on record. We had 15 consecutive days of clouds and rain, along with cool conditions. The bad weather began at the end of April and continued through Mother's Day and into the next week.

Each night, I would go home and hope the weather forecast was going to be better than anticipated or predicted. But as each day went by, the forecast was the same dreary news: cold, cloudy and cool (CCC).

You think I'm a pessimist—just listen to those sour weathermen. It was so bad that I stopped watching the weather forecast. Do you know the old saying, “no news is good news”? Well, I figured that if I didn't listen to the dreary forecast, then it was like getting “no news,” which is supposed to be “good news.” Although this might sound a bit crazy, I can assure you that it certainly helped. Instead of coming to work each day convinced by the sour weatherman or woman that the next five days would be miserable, I came to work hopeful that the weather would improve because I hadn't watched it the day before. It became soothing to my soul to have a positive outlook for that day, albeit ignorant of the real facts.

Did my psychological approach work? Well, it had absolutely no effect on the weather, but it sure made me feel better. Instead of getting all torqued out on how bad things were, I just assumed that things would get better the next day. Surprising to me and my fellow colleagues at work, I was less stressed than my normal spring high-octane approach.

Does this mean we just ignored the consequences the CCC weather had on the crops? Not for a minute! We realized that we had a formidable foe to conquer this spring and we were going to do our best to subdue him. His name is Botrytis! He lurks around in every greenhouse and open field. He's in everyone's garden and

garden center. He's indiscriminate when it comes to his next victim. Any crop will do, any greenhouse will do, any nursery crop will do.

What we needed was a plan! How were we going to keep this invader from conquering the beautiful bedding plants, hanging baskets and planters we had in the greenhouse?

The first step was to do the opposite of what seemed logical. Turn the heat up to 70F. Yes, even though the crops were fully grown and ready for sale, the last thing they needed was more heat. But the first line of defense against botrytis is to keep the foliage of the plants dry. The only way to do that when the air outside the greenhouse was 85% to 100% humidity is to turn on the heat in pulses and vent the warm, wet air outside. This we did for almost three weeks. The one downside to this approach was the natural gas bill we received for the month of April. It recorded the highest gas consumption on record for the month of April. Now, fortunately, the cost of natural gas is down, so the total cost in dollars was manageable.

The next line of defense was to stop watering the plants. Yes, we subjected the plants to a diet of low water. Watering could be done only in the morning and only enough to carry the plants to the next day. If a grower was found watering their section unnecessarily, we beat them with the hose. (Not really.) This required diligent attention to keep the plants dry, but not dead.

We also fogged the greenhouse weekly and some areas bi-weekly with fungicides to combat the botrytis. Although costly, it was essential to the preservation of the crop.

Finally, to combat the extra growth of the plants from the high heat we used growth regulators judiciously.

What was the outcome? We were successful in controlling the botrytis and keeping the flowers from getting overgrown. Finally, when the weather improved after the 15th of May, we were ready to ship quality plants. Now that the spring season is over, we can relax a little knowing we shipped over 99% of our spring crop.

Oh, and by the way, I'm watching the weather forecast again. **GT**

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