

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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The Nicest People Grow Plants

Chris Beytes



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Hurricanes are, I think, the worst natural disaster our industry faces. Blizzards and their snow loads are destructive, but the damage is quite variable and localized. On Long Island in 2013, for instance, a blizzard flattened a big chunk of greenhouse at Van de Wetering, but left homes and other businesses unscathed.

Tornadoes are random killers, leaving one business ruined and another untouched. They're also very localized. Spring floods are generally relegated to known flood plains, such as along the Mississippi. Earthquakes and wildfires are localized and rare (thankfully!).

But a hurricane, with its size and combination of wind and water? I don't need to describe it after weeks of non-stop news coverage and radar images of Harvey and Irma. The only good thing about a hurricane is the warning period forecasters can offer you before the storm stomps ashore.

And once ashore? Ask anyone whose been through one: There's little you can do in defense. Make sure your insurance (property and crop) is in order, back up your computer data, batten down anything you can, then go home and take care of your family, and let your employees do the same. Some fortunate growers can move crops to a safer location ... but what a pain that is! I heard that before Irma hit Florida, one grower moved 40 trailers of poinsettias out of harm's way. I'm sure you'd be happy to load 40 trailers of poinsettias to send to a customer. But just to move them and then move them back? Ugh!

When you finally get back to the business days later and have assessed the damage, you need one thing in order to start the cleanup: employees. Are they okay? Can they get to work? Are the roads clear? Is their car okay? Can they buy gas? Once you have staff on site, you have to take care of them— food and water, restrooms—is the plumbing working? Toilet paper! It's the little necessities you don't think about until it's too late.

Dealing with all of these details and diving into whatever mess the storm left you, you run on adrenaline. "We're good!" you reply to friends and colleagues who inquire after your well-being from afar. And you are

good ... until the adrenaline runs out, and reality and fatigue set in, and you just want to sit down and weep.

And that's when those industry friends come to the rescue. I've seen it time and time again—the good people of this industry roll up their sleeves, open up their greenhouses and nurseries and warehouses and offer anything they have to help you get back on your feet. Truckloads of supplies ... people, too! Volunteers who are always ready to lend a hand to a fellow nursery owner—even a competitor—when times are tough.

What is it that makes the people of horticulture so selfless? Personally, I think it's some residual bit of early farmer in our DNA that quietly reminds us, "There but for the grace of God go I." Some bit of genetic coding that still remembers an ancient flood or hail storm wiping out the grain crop.

Also, it's humbling to grow plants year after year. We've all had failures (ask me about leaf miners and whiteflies). Mother Nature can strike at any time and we know it. Which is why, when she invariably does, we rise up together to fight back.

We all came to horticulture by myriad paths, but I'd wager that, other than the beauty of our products, it's the inner beauty of our people that keeps us here. Ask anyone who's come to horticulture from another industry and they'll agree: competitors in their old world never sat down and broke bread or shared a beer. Here, it's the norm.

So why don't we promote this to potential employees? There's lots of talk these days about, "How do we attract new folks to horticulture?" Yet not once have I heard "great people" offered as a benefit. Certainly, we can't sell them on the fat paychecks, attractive hours or comfortable work conditions we offer. But we can tell them that they'll be joining a family that will stand with them through thick and thin.

And hurricanes. Take that, Harvey and Irma! **GT**