

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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From Holes to Whole Again

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Larry Barr, owner of Island Tropical Foliage, stands proud in his Homestead, Florida, shadehouse despite the holes in the fabric. After surviving Hurricane Irma back in September, he knows he's lucky to have shadecloth to protect his plants. One shade manufacturer told us that they had just completed filling September orders and were working on October ... and this was in mid-January! They had nearly doubled staff and were working two shifts to meet the back-orders of what had to be hundreds of acres of fabric.

But Larry was able to save his shade, at least for this house.

"We're almost 100% back," he says of the reconstruction. "I started ordering things the day after the hurricane with no hesitation. We went right back into it."

Island Tropical was one of 1,400 registered Dade County nurseries to survive 20 hours of sustained tropical storm-

force winds and hurricane-force gusts during the September 10 storm. Damage was downplayed by many growers, but the reality is, many businesses were flattened. Larry was lucky: his 20-acre location (he has five more nearby) is mostly open growing area, with just a couple of acres of covered growing. His metal structures were bent and mangled, and shade was ripped away. But he'll admit that Irma wasn't anything like Andrew, which hit Homestead in 1992 with sustained winds of 165 mph.

"That was total devastation, you know? This one wasn't as bad," he recalls.

Larry started Island Tropical about 20 years ago after stints with a few other Homestead nurseries. The business is split 50/50 into two markets: spring tropical and patio plants, and export to the Caribbean, including lots of tropical natives. Many of the plants he grows can go to both markets. Agave is a major crop. And he buys in about half of what he sells.

"In a typical week, we might buy from 50 different nurseries."

Despite the structural damage, something good came from the hurricane: Royal Caribbean cruise lines donated funds to the island of St. Thomas to help replant a beach frequented by cruise passengers and Larry was asked to source 30 container-loads of seagrapes, coconut palms and clusias to replant the beach in time for the winter cruise season.

"That's a cool project. Everybody was happy. Royal Caribbean was happy, St. Thomas was happy. And the guy who installed it is one of our customers, too." **GT**