

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Flex Your Greenhouse

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Imagine this: Your greenhouse benches are filled to the max with product for peak spring sales and you get a call that a large plug order just arrived. What do you do? This isn't an uncommon predicament for greenhouse professionals and a multitude of strategies to solve the space challenge exist. From filling aisles and walkways to contracting production with other greenhouses, it's important to have a plan in place when this "Oh no!" moment occurs, which it will.



Maximizing space efficiency is a buzz phrase these days. And as is true for many trendy topics, the reality of the situation often transcends the type of click-bait solutions that emerge. There are no "10 proven ways to efficiently grow an extra 10%", but instead many on-the-fly decisions you need to make.

Bringing production and sales teams together to solve problems with a quick, stand-up meeting while grabbing the third cup of coffee before 9:00 a.m. is reality during peak spring production when space is at a premium. Sometimes the solution is "just wing it," but we all know having a plan is a more effective approach.

Here's what some greenhouses do to create safety valves to cope with peaks and overflows without adding covered space.

Think ahead

During less stressful times of the year, it's a good practice to spend time walking your facilities and considering spaces that can be used to grow or hold plants when space gets tight. Bring a small team along—the folks who grow in your facilities day to day. Consider including team members who think creatively and have had experience in your greenhouses for multiple seasons. Ask them if they know areas with suitable climates or where they see extra, unused space. Keep a list of these spaces and file them away for the times you run into overflow challenges.

James Russell, VP at Armstrong Growers, is responsible for production greenhouses in California and Georgia, and keenly knows the reality of meeting peak demand.

"We fill the walkways and use part of our loading docks to help the overflow," he says.

This is a very common strategy during peak season: filling every possible square foot with plants. You've all been in greenhouses with trays lined up along aisles and laid out within an inch of the walls. Consider the absolute minimum space you need for growers to move product in and out, and pack the greenhouse to the gills. Hopefully, when it comes time to ship, you can quickly remove these added plants and return production space to the intended use.

“We will utilize space that we typically try to keep open,” explains Andy Ambrosio, sales manager for Wenke Greenhouses in Kalamazoo, Michigan. “Main aisles get a little narrower and other facilities will be deployed.”

Understanding their facilities allows Wenke to make the call quickly, when overflow is expected. Andy says they might move pansies, perennials or other cold-tolerant plants to an outdoor structure with little heat—sometimes earlier than planned. This requires not only an understanding of facilities, but also a knowledge of crop culture. Be sure to consider the crops you move and what environments they need to grow in a healthy way.

Sales integration

We work in an unpredictable industry. That crop you plan to ship out Week 16 may not go until Week 18 and suddenly you have a major space dilemma. This is when close communication between your production and sales teams is highly critical. Sales forecasting must be in sync with space utilization.

“We look to make sure we are full, but not overfull, as transplanting a week or two late is not desirable for overall quality,” Andy says. “Because we produce our own inputs that truckload of plugs and liners [from the hypothetical question posed above] just became space we have available for the last turn of finished products.”

“When weather is less-than-favorable and sales are delayed, we do hit a crunch and run out of total space,” he adds.

This is when the sales manager works closely with the head grower and prioritizes what to plant and what to hold back. At Wenke, items that are presold for landscapers get priority, followed by core items and crops with higher-than-average net margins. This seems like an excellent guideline: focus on the items that generate the most profitability.

Glenn Harrison, Operations Manager at Cavicchio Greenhouse in Sudbury, Massachusetts, says at peak times having a solid plan in place is paramount to avoid chaos and poor decision making.

“It’s those peak times that reinforce how important it is to execute the production planning process to make sure things don’t get too overwhelming,” he warns. “Planning in a few relief valves to accommodate unforeseen problems is always good practice.”

At the end of the day, there really are no shortcuts; you need to utilize every square foot you have, he adds.

Working together

All the planning in the world can sometimes not be enough—the aisles are full, the outdoor space is maxed out and you’ve hung as many baskets from other baskets as is humanly possible, yet you still need more space. Now is when experience (and relationship) kicks in.

Growers have had good and bad experiences contracting production out to other greenhouses with extra space. Some of these partnerships have been in place for years and work seamlessly, benefitting both parties. These are the good times. Growers who have good working relationships and similar standards can often work together to deliver top quality on time. But this isn’t always the case. Spend time cultivating these partnerships and define a shared vision (based on reality), so when push comes to shove, everyone is operating on the same page.

“We have contracted with other greenhouses and that has worked when you have good access to watch your crops,” James says. “We have also used space at someone else’s facility and it’s been a disaster.”

Make sure they care as much as you do or have a similar quality standard, he said.

When all else fails

With weather being out of our control, sometimes drastic measures need to be taken. You've all been there. Crops are stretching past the point of saleable and the next crop is coming into color and needs to be potted up. Having a well-thought-out plan in place for dumping can be the best approach, although it's never easy.

"If we are really backed up, we'll look very carefully at items that are getting past their 'born-on' date and throw them away," Andy explains. "The worst thing is to keep product that gets too overgrown to ship and miss the chance to replant that space with product that will sell."

Knowing when to say when takes experience and guts. Keep in mind that the earlier you make this decision, the less money you'll lose.

A final story

Andy remembers spring 2018 as one of the best examples illustrating the realities of flexing space and reacting to unexpected challenges.

"I believe the worst year for the industry was the spring of 2018, when we had cold, wintery weather all the way up until the last week of April," he said. "We were able to get by, but we had to use every tool in the book to keep planting somewhat on schedule. When Week 18 hit, it was a tsunami of shipping carts heading down the road!"

He ends with these words of wisdom: Mother Nature rules, no matter how much we plan. Isn't that the truth ... **GT**