

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

6/1/2020

As for Next Spring ... ?

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Under normal circumstance, planning for the coming season is exciting. It can be fun to gather with staff to pick out the new stuff to grow, the new sizes and new containers, figure what to drop, and debate whether or not you can get a price increase. Some folks, especially those who are data-driven, find the challenge of planning to be the best part of the job.

Others, not so much. Take me, for instance. I'd rather do than plan to do. Back when I was a greenhouse owner, I left much of the planning to my wife, who knew the crops and kept the records. Me, I like to operate from gut rather than from numbers, so my contribution was confirming her ideas (or shooting them down) based on my instincts.

For folks who don't like to plan, it's the stress of the decision-making (How many? How few? Which ones?) and the stress of having to live with the decisions (What if we don't sell it? What if it rains? Will we lose customers if we raise prices?). That's why many grower's idea of planning is telling their seed company broker, "Give me the same as last year, please ... and toss in two trays of those new yellow petunias you told me about. Oh, and that weird 'carnival plant' you talked me into? A dog. Cancel that."

Which brings us to planning for next season when this season was a crazy, roaring, raging, once-in-a-lifetime anomaly. I don't have to tell you about it—you lived it and still are. But in a nutshell, the pandemic destroyed the horticulture business in April and sent it soaring to record highs in May. (June wasn't yet in the books by the time I wrote this, but all indications were that it would also boom, provided the weather held ... and maybe even if it didn't.) Your mood, and that of your staff and customers, fluctuated just as wildly, I'm sure.

In mid-May, at the height of the frenzy, a Missouri grower/retailer emailed me a cry for help:

"How am I supposed to plan for next year?!?!?!" she wrote. "I am so sick of the uncertainty. Several customers last week were very upset: 'I stayed home like I was supposed to,' 'Why is it all gone?,' 'You've been busy,' in accusing tones. This has been the most exhausting rollercoaster ride of a year with the most bitter success I've ever experienced."

This gave me pause. How in the world can I help? Not that she wanted answers; she more likely just wanted to vent. But still, it's a question lots of you have, and our job at GrowerTalks is to find the answers to your questions.

Then it hit me: I know the answer ... or at least an answer. It comes from a conversation I had back in 2014 with John van Wingerden of Green Circle Growers and Express Seed, which turned into the cover of the January 2015 issue, titled "[Right-Size for Reality](#)."

John's premise (based on decades of his and his family's experience) is that in any given 10-year period there will generally be two great seasons, two terrible seasons and six average seasons. That means if you always plan to have a great season, you'll only hit your goal two years out of 10—20%—and in the two lousy years, you will really miss your mark.

However, if you plan for average, you'll hit your mark eight seasons out of 10—80% of the time. Granted, you may leave some money on the table in those two great seasons, but the lousy years won't be as painful. It's a philosophy and strategy that makes sense and holds true no matter the cause of the seasonal fluctuations.

Which is why I think I'll make it the foundation of my advice to growers on how to approach 2021: View 2020 as the anomaly that it was, just as if your business had been wiped out by a hurricane, or it had been sunny and mild every single weekend between Easter and Memorial Day and your sales broke every record—you wouldn't expect the same next year. For 2021, perhaps you'll add some more edibles, just in case the veggie and herb craze continues. And certainly keep pushing the houseplants, which show no sign of abating. But otherwise, shoot for a solid, average season.

Then pray for good weather because that's the one uncertainty we face every season. **GT**