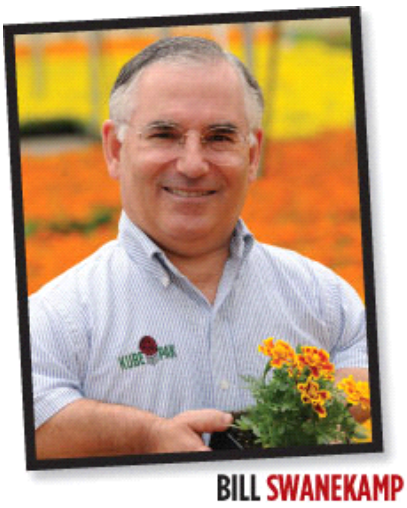
GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Who Woulda Thought?

Bill Swanekamp



"Who woulda thought?" is a slang expression that's commonly used in the illustrious state of New Jersey. It basically means that one is surprised by something that's happened that was unexpected. To illustrate, who of us imagined six to eight months ago that a global pandemic would sweep the world and cause almost the complete shutdown of the U.S. economy? None of us have ever seen anything like this before and I'm pretty certain we don't want to see it again.

What made the situation even more unexpected is that for the first two-and-a-half months of 2020 we were having a fantastic plug season. Sales were up 12% and demand was very high. Then March came and the threat of the coronavirus started to become a reality instead of a distant concern in another nation. The government started talking about "Shelter in Place," which was changed to "Please Stay at Home" to "Stay at Home."

Around the second week of March, the governor of New Jersey closed all businesses except those that were considered "essential." At first horticulture wasn't considered essential unless you were growing vegetables. You want to talk about anxiety—here we were with acres of beautiful pansies and violas and since garden centers weren't considered essential for flower sales, we had to dump over $50,000 worth of these crops. Now the greater concern was what was going to happen for the balance of the spring season. What were we going to do with 20 acres of growing bedding plants, hanging baskets and planters? No one knew!

On top of all of that, the weather in April was nothing short of horrendous. Cold, windy, rainy, with many nights dropping below freezing and turning plants growing outside into icicles. Misery turned into double misery and the news media just kept making it all sound so bad that you began to question your sanity.

It was evident that the spring season was going to start late if it was going to start at all. What could we do? This is where hope springs eternal as a grower. We're always trying to figure out how to overcome whatever elements Nature throws at us, so we sat down as a group and analyzed our options. How could we delay the spring crop until the restrictions were either partially lifted or completely?

First thing we did was to lower the temperature in the greenhouse both day and night. We lowered our daytime cooling to 50F and our nighttime heating to 50F. This caused most of the plants to either stop growing or slow down enough to control.

Second, we started running the plants very dry. Somewhere between a 2 or a high 1. This had a very beneficial effect on their growth; it was almost like freezing them in time, except we weren't injuring the plant. A little bit like suspended animation. I couldn't help but think of some old "Star Trek" shows where they found humans in space frozen for hundreds of years just waiting to be thawed so they could get back to normal. (Does Khan ring a bell?) That's what we were doing to these beautiful annuals.

Thirdly, we used growth regulators on the varieties that kept growing under the cold and dry conditions.

The combination of all these steps worked fantastically. Now all we needed was some warmer weather and the shackles removed from our hands. This is where the "Who woulda thought?" comes in. Right around the time when we thought all hope was lost and we would be joining the unemployment lines, the governor eased the restrictions on garden centers and landscapers.

On May 5, an imaginary switch was flipped and the flood gates were opened. From the 6th of May until the end of May, we shipped at full capacity each day until we could take no more. Our bodies were crying in pain and my brain was suffering from exhaustion due to the extreme demand.

What happened? We went from the brink of disaster to the heights of success in just one month. No one predicted such an initial crisis or the stunning final outcome. Now, I know not all growers had the same success or other businesses fared as well, such as restaurants, but we can be very thankful for the outcome we've enjoyed.

In mid-June, the governor removed the stay-at-home order. Will the state and country get back to normal? That's the question to be answered over the next 12 months. Hopefully, at this time next year, we'll be talking about how we got through another season and maybe we'll be able to enjoy the fruits of our labors. **GT**

Bill Swanekamp is president of Kube-Pak Corp., Allentown, New Jersey.