

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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On a Scale of 1 to 10 ...

Chris Beytes



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If I have your email address, chances are very good you've been seeing me ask the above since the last weekend of March in reference to your sales the previous weekend. I call it "The *GrowerTalks* Spring Weekend Sales Survey" and I've been doing it since 2011.

It's not exactly scientific ... in fact, it's not scientific at all, as any economist will tell you. Like TAMU's Dr. Charlie Hall, a card-carrying economist. He tells me it's an "amalgamation of opinion" gathered from a "convenience sample," which serves as a "bellwether." Which sounds impressive to me! All I know is for the past decade I've had hundreds of regular respondents from around the U.S. and Canada (and occasionally abroad) sending me details about their spring sales. It may not be scientific, but it sure is interesting!

Especially this year, which will go down in history as the strangest spring in anyone's memory. Mid-March saw the beginning of the pandemic and shelter-in-place orders, and for a couple weeks it looked like there might not be a Spring 2020. That was as frightening as it gets for growers and retailers. And brokers, too, who will tell you their phones started ringing with cancellations.

Two weeks later, the phones were ringing again, this time cancelling the cancellations as word got out that not only were most garden retailers allowed to open, but customers were coming out and in droves. It wasn't soon enough to save Easter potted plant and spring pansy sales, but good weather combined with incredible demand seven days a week regardless of the weather led to record May and June sales, and a total season-long score of 8.1 in the U.S. and 8.2 in Canada (as of June 15). In comparison, last year scored 7.3/7.2, 2018 was 6.7/6.7 and 2017 was 7.0/5.9. I don't believe we've ever had a full season score in the 8s in the history of this survey.

But Charlie Hall reminded me that not everyone was celebrating. Charlie has been doing a regular survey with about 50 growers across the country, asking if their sales are up, flat or down over last year and by how much. As of this writing, 68% were up, 9% were flat and 24% were down. That's an improvement over two weeks ago, when his data showed 53% up, 18% flat and 31% down. By the end of the season, things might have improved a tad more.

But that doesn't negate the fact that a quarter of Charlie's respondents are down from 1% to 10% and a few are down a lot—11% to 25%—which would indicate that more than a few growers across the U.S. and Canada suffered while the rest celebrated. Still, that's the case every spring, due to weather or crop catastrophes or greenhouse fires or what-have-you.

The question now is what do we do for next year? Last month, I addressed the topic of how to plan. This month, I've got three tips on supply and demand, because for many of you, running out of plants early was what kept spring from being all it could be. These ideas come from columnist Abe VanWingerden of Metrolina Greenhouses in North Carolina, where demand is such that this spring they shipped, at peak, 210 trailers (8,000 carts) in one day.

Tip 1: "Don't give it away." You can't necessarily change the number of units you've got to sell, but you can change your prices. If you have a planned sale at a lower price, limit quantities. Metrolina planned to be up 6% and instead are up 12%, said Abe. "Just not giving stuff away helped a ton."

Tip 2: "Don't dump it, bump it." Many growers don't buy into this, but Abe says if you have something that didn't sell, cut it back or bump it up to a bigger size. "Sometimes, it's not the item, it's the timing. An item in April that didn't work might sell in a bigger size in June."

Tip 3: "Get into a network of local/regional growers." Now is the time to work together, Abe suggests. "The supply chain is far from perfect. Someone is always out and someone always has too much, even this year. Work together to buy in product. But know your cost when buying in so you do it profitably."

Concludes Abe, "These things don't happen magically. It takes work, analytics, planning, some risk-taking and a willingness to reach out to competition to make it happen." **GT**