

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Oh, the Uncertainty! (Not Another COVID-19 Article)

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Here in Florida we've seen our share of natural disasters. The local communities come together to take care of one another. With an event like a hurricane, it's a single moment in time that has a definite start and also comes with a certain end. The aftermath affects everyone. Goals are set and plans are made. The follow-through is strong and determined. In the end, the community rebuilds physically and socially stronger than before.

Hurricane Charlie in 2004 changed my hometown of Wauchula to the extent that it'll never be the same as it was in my childhood. It physically looks and feels different. To the same extent, this pandemic is forcing changes in our industry that will make it look and feel very different for many years to come.

We all know and can see what retail companies are doing to cope and evolve—not only to keep their employees safe, but also to keep business open. New, creative ways of getting plants in the hands of the consumers are being dreamed up overnight. With this pandemic, what was thought to be a short-term change in business has become the long-term normal.

After the January 2020 TPIE show, the “COVID stuff” really started to hit the fan. The whole industry was more than a bit nervous about spring. Unfortunately, Easter was hit hard with so many churches cancelling Easter services and Mother's Day was just marginal for many. However, spring planting and general houseplant garden center sales were way up. Who saw that coming in March?

So where do we go from here? It's time to be planning spring 2021 and we should be potting fall/winter speculation now. Also, as I write this, the Cultivate show should be in full swing this week and the excitement of the next year should be starting to build. I'm missing the physical feel of the show and the social interaction.

I'm missing a really important tool to help gauge how to plan for 2021—not to mention it being an election year along with all the current social unrest just adds to what feels like a big gamble. Trusted business relationships are MORE important than ever. Communication between grower and retailer must be fluid and trustworthy. Both parties have equal part in doing their best to ensure all responsibilities are met.

Our company plan is to mirror spring 2020 numbers with slight increases in volume to account for increased speculative sales. Growth needs to happen in a responsible, sustainable way to ensure long-term goals are met through such a volatile market time. To be honest, we're all guessing here and for the big picture to work, all the pieces need to come together. It doesn't take but one really bad crop to financially set a business back big time. Just ask the Easter lily growers.

I've been thinking, "It's been a great year for general houseplant sales so let's not ruin it!" Could the industry be on the edge of over-production if we have a plateau in demand? If starter cuts and liner supply could instantly ramp up to meet the current demand the industry is asking for, I would emphatically say, yes! However, the slow-to-change nature of the houseplant liners and cutting supply industry has hedged some safety in that regard. There are also some concerns being whispered through the supply chain of the possibility that COVID-19 sets in hard on Costa Rica and Guatemala. The local government's response could be to shut down local farm and shipping supply lines, which would stop plant material from making it out of Central America. With an all-time high in summer sales, this would send wholesale nurseries into a buying frenzy. But this is all still speculation.

In spring 2015, every business who set goals of where they saw themselves in five years was dead wrong. No one would ever dream of a "global pandemic" followed by international travel bans, curfews and social restrictions to the extent this generation has never seen. You couldn't write a better plot for a fiction novel.

Well, we're all in this together. We're in the *BEST INDUSTRY* with the *BEST PEOPLE* you could ever ask to work with. More than just being fellow nurseryman, supplier partners and customers, I consider so many of these people to be my friend. We'll make it through this just fine and come out a stronger industry with one heck of a story to tell the next generation. **GT**

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