

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Let's "Spring Into Action"

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I think the biggest reason I'm excited about this article is it's looking BEYOND the year 2020. I'm ready for some normalcy. You know, boring "plants in, plants out." One 2020 highlight is that prospective fourth quarter sales for garden centers, florists and virtual storefronts remain extremely high!

I want to discuss a few factors that will be affecting foliage plant supply for spring 2021:

Cutting and tissue culture supply—Items are starting to trickle in for spring 2021 plantings and we're constantly being shorted on incoming material both in cuttings and liners. The overall Florida spring bookings are BIG and the cutting suppliers in Central America are doing their best to try and meet the high demand. A bit of social unrest in Costa Rica had protestors shutting down roads around San Jose Airport and other main highways used for exporting cuttings. Although this issue has been resolved, this example shows how small ripples up the supply chain can carry huge implications for growers and retailers in such a high-demand market.

The tissue culture labs producing interior houseplants and the bold tropical foliage for spring planters are selling on empty benches. If the material wasn't booked, it's just not going to happen. Even material that's been booked eight to 10 months in advance are showing shortages. The foliage crops are oversold and with ANY cultural rooting or growing issues, those numbers are coming right off someone's order. We're constantly searching, trying to build up numbers to get to where we need to be to satisfy spring pre-booked orders. The alocasia and colocasia plugs should be arriving through January and we've already been told to expect shortages there as well due to cultural issues in some labs. The importance of pre-booking finished spring material will be super evident in 2021. Even those who did pre-booked finished foliage for spring may be disappointed due the grower's inability to procure plugs and cuttings.

Labor—I've had the opportunity to sit on multiple volunteer boards spanning our horticulture industries from landscape and foliage houseplants to cut flower floriculture and the one tying topic is labor. We have a timeline set in stone on when material is planted to finish in spring and the starter material will arrive whether we have the manpower to plant it all or not. In Florida, the agriculture industry is battling a booming housing industry that constantly scrapes off the farm labor for higher-paying construction jobs. This coupled with Florida's winter specialty crops, such as winter strawberries and blueberries, heavily competes with hiring local labor.

Freight—Now, this is a topic that lies squarely on the shoulders of COVID-19. In normal years, around 60% of air freight is carried by international and domestic passenger airlines. The latest figures have passenger flights down 70% to 85%. To say the least, dedicated cargo flights are in crazy high demand because of the extreme reduction in passenger flights. This coupled with the spike in online home deliveries is driving the cost of air freight up. The same spike in home deliveries using domestic shipping will surely put a squeeze on trucking costs and availability come

springtime. The only bright spot amongst the shipping gloom is fuel prices are currently low. We'll worry more about outbound finished plant shipping when that problem arrives sometime around Week 16. Right now, we're just concerned with getting the liner material here from Central America.

I was introduced to the term "Groundhog Day Effect." It describes the day-to-day mental and physical anxiety business owners and managers face with the multi-complex problems of COVID-19—from employees unexpectedly disappearing due to quarantining and late or missing inbound freight with no time guarantee coupled with the highest sales demand I've ever seen.

The mental attrition that wears at the key decision makers, both personal and professional, is like battle fatigue. There's a plethora of long-term issues owners should be focusing on, like 2021 spring numbers and new variety trials. The fact is we've been so ultra-attentive to today's momentary problems, we've failed to step back and forecast what we need to be doing to prepare for next year. Horticulture businesses need to re-find the balance of long-term planning amongst all the crazy short-term caveats COVID-19 is providing.

I would say I'm ready to get back to normal if I could remember what normal was. If this is the new normal, then we need to adapt to become even more flexible to the demands of the high-stakes momentary environment. Remember, most problems are short term. Every day I'm trying to tell myself not to be short-sighted and to set aside time to look and plan for the long term. I'm really looking forward to the challenges of 2021 and beyond. I just need to plan a sustainable path to get there. **GT**

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