

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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“Network or Not Work”

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There's never been a better time for being a squeaky wheel ... you know, the one making the noise and getting the grease. Or, in this case, getting the annuals, perennials, foliage plants, greenhouse structures, potting machines, benches ...

If you hadn't noticed, the pandemic has had a major side-effect: The world's supply chain is completely screwed up. Everything is in short supply—raw materials, finished goods, and the transportation and labor needed to get them to your business. And what you can get costs you more. The only bright side is that you're not alone—it's hitting every manufacturer, every retailer ... Ford and Walmart are cursing the situation as loudly as you are.

The core of the problem is complex and multifaceted, but in a nutshell, most raw materials suppliers and manufacturers had to slow down or shut down

due to COVID. Shipping ports, too. Some years back, railroads got “lean” to save money, and that has left them short of railcars and staff. Labor is hard to find at every step in the chain. Companies worldwide, desperate for product, are bidding up the cost of shipping containers. The end result is that our little industry suffers.

As I mentioned in the two-page Cultivate'21, an industry consultant told me that a logistics expert he knows doesn't expect the supply chain situation to get better until the second quarter of 2022. If that's the case, we've got to get through another spring before the supply chain is back to something resembling normal.

If that worries you, if you feel that all this supply-and-demand stuff is out of your control, let me offer some advice that came from Lorraine Ballato, a Cultivate attendee and author of “Success with Hydrangeas.” She and I were chatting in the GrowerTalks booth about how nice it was to once again see suppliers and customers in person, and she said, succinctly, “Network or not work!”

True! If you're there, live and in person, face-to-face with the folks who have what you want, you have the best chance of getting it.

That was confirmed by a friend at the show who has a large tropical plant business. He's basically sold out until 2023. But a customer expressed a desperate need for something and he managed to find it ... or was at least looking hard for it when we spoke. That's not something he would do unless pressed.

The face-to-face technique has always been the best way to get orders fulfilled in the quantity and timeliness you

need. It's why we attend trade shows and open house events. It's much harder for a supplier to say no when you're eye-to-eye with them ... and when your eye is a pleading eye.

Plus, there's the intelligence-gathering benefit of in-person communications. I often get news scoops simply by showing up in person someplace. It's how I learned before anyone else that the California Summer Trials had been moved back to spring—at lunch, I was sitting next to the chap responsible for writing the press release.

Thankfully, in the end we're plant sellers, and plant availability is less subject to logistics and more subject to simple supply-and-demand: a supplier can only produce so many cuttings or liners. However, they can add space, work with contract growers or find other means of boosting supply, and if you're there asking about it, you might be in a position to score some of that extra availability ahead of your competition.

Based on this risk that the supply chain may not loosen up until next spring or even beyond, I think this fall is the best time ever to get out of the greenhouse and start hitting live events. If you missed Cultivate, there's the Farwest Show, The Landscape Show, the Canadian Greenhouse Conference, numerous distributor events ... plenty of places to get networking so you can keep working. **GT**