

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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The Importance of Transparent Communication

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For every plant-loving retail customer, the arrival of spring is a welcome sight. The anticipation of vibrant blooms and lush foliage takes center stage, but little do they know the intricate dance that happens behind the scenes to make this vision a reality. The journey from liner producer to grower, followed by wholesaler to retailer and, ultimately, to the end consumer is a well-orchestrated symphony, where effective communication is the key to success at every turn.

To the retail customer, the concept of “spring” is only top of mind when the season arrives. When the time is right, they can stroll down to their local garden center during Weeks 15 to 22 and be greeted by a breathtaking array of plant material ready to transform their winter-weary patios into vibrant displays of color and texture. All the challenges of shortages, substitutions and transportation hiccups have been skillfully navigated through the collaborative efforts of vendors and buyers. The only decision left for the end consumer is which colors to choose and how many pots to bring home.

For the Florida tropical plant grower, spring is top of mind most of the year. We start planning next spring as soon as the last plants ship out from the current year. It's during late June that orders for cuttings and plug material for the following year are meticulously placed, with hopes of securing the best selection and availability. By October, the heaviest planting time rolls around, requiring growers to manage a multitude of planting activities simultaneously.

The challenge lies in placing plants with similar watering, spray requirements and lighting together while considering the available square footage. This complex juggling act continues as salespeople manage prebooked orders, adjusting contracted versus speculative material. It's a dynamic process that unfolds until the last cutting and plug finds its way into the soil or until space runs out. Ideally, the former happens before the latter, as no one enjoys making that call to a customer to cut a prebook.

So what can be done to pave a smoother road and ensure a seamless transition from cutting and plug suppliers all the way to the end retail garden center? In the words of George Bernard Shaw, “The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

In this crazy game of producing spring tropicals, when navigating the moving target of supply versus projected demand, coupled with the uncertainty of availability of cuttings and hardgoods supply, communication is never truly complete. What may seem insignificant to a grower, such as a minor container change, can have far-reaching consequences in a meticulously designed garden. Transparency is the key and it's a two-way street.

Growers strive to be as transparent as possible and encourage their vendors to follow suit. There's often a fear among sales staff that complete transparency may expose gaps and weaknesses in a company's operations. However, the reality is that most companies face similar challenges. Acknowledging a problem, communicating it openly and working collaboratively to find solutions can lead to a stronger bond between vendor and customer.

In today's dynamic prebook sales environment, liner suppliers play a critical role in keeping growers informed. Early notifications about supply availability gaps enable growers to make informed decisions, and if necessary, offer suitable substitutions to customers while maintaining the same grow week timeline for finishing spring product. Effective communication here ensures that plants are delivered to the greenhouse on time. Thus, timely planting occurs and the correct week countdown to finished product begins.

The first spring shipping is completely dependent on weather conditions. We generally try to be ready by Week 13. However, it's all up to Mother Nature to say when the last frost will happen, and the commercial installers and homeowners feel safe enough for planting. Having a quick warmup means the spring season could be extended and sales might happen at a slower, more consistent, rate.

This is another crucial stage of communication between the wholesalers and the grower. We need to have the correct material staged for shipping at the correct intervals to match retailer needs for retail sales. Spring is a frantic period for growers. Weeks 16 to 22 can be nothing short of overwhelming. However, pre-planning an effective shipping plan bolstered with open, clear communication between parties concerning weather and updates on week-to-week sales is what makes this rush manageable.

A plant's journey from liner producer to grower to the end consumer is a finely tuned process where communication plays a pivotal role in ensuring its annual success. As spring approaches, let us bear in mind the significance of clear and transparent communication at every stage. Make no mistake—"success" doesn't happen on accident and the word "hope" doesn't constitute a plan. If you haven't contacted your spring tropicals provider, feel free to do so. Ask questions about shipping or request current crop photos of spring materials. Be open and communicate your needs and concerns from the previous year. In the end, it all starts with a successful retail experience for the rest of the successes to happen back up the chain. **GT**

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