

Spring Season Success?

A sure sign of the end of a successful spring season — product is shipped and shipped, and employees are left with a mess to clean up.

New crops, weather, prices...many things factor into a successful or not so successful spring. Here's how those factors affected growers around the country.

By Carrie Burns

Here we are again — another spring finished and much talk of how it went. Hopefully, you are starting to think about the upcoming 2006 season — always forward thinking — but before you do, we thought you'd like to take a look at how some growers around the country fared this spring.

I received varied responses when I asked about weather around the country. It seems that the Northeast and West were hit pretty hard with bad weather, while a select few in other parts of the country had a decent spring. One non-weather-related trend the growers I spoke to identified is an increased interest in unique and different crops. The basics — impatiens, petunias, New Guineas, etc. — seem to be down. I saw a hint of this when doing last year's review, but it was pretty obvious this year. Many other conclusions can be drawn from these responses, so without further ado, here are a few thoughts from some of your peers around the country.

WHICH CROPS WERE MORE POPULAR THAN YOU ANTICIPATED?

"We had a much more successful year than anticipated on basic varieties like 10-inch hanging baskets and 4-inch annuals. The economy and our customer strategies drove this, but we also saw a big gain on endcap items

like 10- and 12-inch terra cotta pots and bigger hanging baskets like fiber baskets. On varieties, we had a very strong year on geraniums, gerberas, petunias and impatiens, and it was a slower year on salvia, pansies and New Guineas." —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

"Basically, the kind of crops we've been growing for the past few years that seem to be catching on with the customers — things like calibrachoa and Wave petunias seem to be selling really well. I wouldn't say any one thing in particular surprised us." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

"The seed annuals seemed to do better — marigolds and petunias — than anything else." —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

"There were things we ran out of during the timeframe we could've sold them in. We had some later, but during that selling window the things we didn't have enough of were mostly baskets." —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

WHICH CROPS WERE NOT AS POPULAR AS YOU ANTICIPATED?

"Shade impatiens definitely did not move.

And even a little bit of the Proven Winners stuff didn't seem to move as well as it normally has. I think a lot of that could be price driven, too." —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.*

"We ran long on petunias, which is a major crop for us. We're still selling perennials, but we'll probably be long on those in the small sizes." —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

"I think we did fairly well predicting what we were going to sell, and we didn't really get stuck with too much. What we did get stuck with was items that aren't flowering-type material — stuff like lysmachia, lamium, stuff that's more like an accent plant for the garden." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

"The vegetative annuals seemed to be a little slower. I think customers are seeing a snapdragon as a snapdragon, and they're not going after the one that may trail or even last a little bit longer." —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

"We may have had too much Proven Winners. We had a lot of New Guinea impatiens left over. They didn't seem to be too popular this year." —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.* ♦

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WHAT IS ONE NEW VARIETY OR CROP YOU TRIED FOR THE FIRST TIME THIS SPRING THAT YOU WILL GROW AGAIN NEXT YEAR?

"We add 100+ varieties every year, and some of those will be back next year. Mecardonia from Proven Winners in a basket was really nice. This isn't the first year we've had the Symphony osteos (Proven Winners), but those do really well for us." —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

"We did a fair amount of the perilla Magilla (Ball FloraPlant) and the Kong coleus (PanAmerican Seed). We got a lot of calls for that after we sold out." —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

"'Jungle Gold' impatiens (PanAmerican Seed). It's a yellow bloom impatiens, and it doesn't look like your normal impatiens. It performed well, and there was some interest [from customers]." —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.*

"New colors for a lot of the flowering stuff. Many of the new colors of pansies and a lot of the new calibrachoa we tried this year did very well. We tried a couple new things, nothing that really stood out, more than anything before." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

"Kong coleus is the easy answer; that really worked well for us. We also had really good success on Caliente geraniums (Fischer USA)." —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

"Probably angelonia. We did angelonia for the first time, and that went really well." —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

HOW DID THE WEATHER IN YOUR AREA AFFECT PRODUCTION?

"It delayed it. [The rain and cool weather] gave us some production challenges, and it definitely delayed sales. We were holding onto crops longer than we anticipated. Our window was a little later. But we're fortunate because we have some late market sales areas, so they kind of help us on a year like this when we still have some opportunities to sell." —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

"There were no real effects from the weather. Everything was [good] as far as May and the beginning of June. Summer? We're in a terrible drought here [right now]. It's not good, and we do summer production of annuals. There has been very little garden center action this summer because of our current weather conditions." —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.*

"It was a very bad year for weather, probably one of the worst we've had in many years. It was so stagnant this year for sales. Just terrible weather for sales when it comes down to the consumer buying from the retail customer; if they're not selling, we're definitely holding onto product a lot longer. The weather started warm and then got really, really cool. Right around the beginning of June the weather hit, and it just got extremely hot. When the weather is bad like that, you're forced to do a lot more marketing and selling of your product, whereas before you could rely on the name of the business and your product basically selling itself." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

"The early cold slowed sales in March, but then after the second week of April the weekends were nice and stayed dry. Temperatures were hotter than normal from mid-May through June, but the consumer did not seem to mind this year. From a production standpoint, the cooler start slowed the first turn of product, but then hotter [weather in] May helped to turn the next couple of crops very well." —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

"It didn't affect production so much as it did sales — slowed down right around Mother's Day again; kind of got a little darker and wetter. Production weather was about average." —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

"It was a lousy spring — too much rain — and then summer hit, and it was too hot." —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

HOW WERE YOUR PRICES THIS YEAR COMPARED TO LAST? DID THEY HOLD THROUGHOUT THE SEASON?

"We made a modest increase. I don't remember what the percentage was, but we did go up a little bit. Yes, we delayed putting things on any kind of sale a little longer than normal. The other area we made some increases is we changed some of our delivery charges, adding a fuel surcharge or increasing the percentage a little bit — probably more than on the actual plant material." —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

"They went up. I included a heating fuel surcharge in my prices this year, and I also made some price adjustments. So I would say that prices certainly went up 5 percent from the year prior. Yes [they held throughout the season]. I'm always good with holding prices until the 10th of June, and then you start diving and...moving and shaking." —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.* ♦

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"Prices went up. Last year was such a hard year fuel-wise that we had no choice. We had to raise prices. We kind of experimented with throwing on delivery charges, which was the last thing we wanted to do, but again, it was something we had to do. We did also raise product prices on a few things. We tried to bump the price up on our 6½-inch jumbos. Within the last two years, we've raised the price on several different things, and some customers understand that and some don't." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

"Retail prices were actually 2- to 4-percent higher this year and then held longer, as the strong spring season went later than usual this year. Our customers had record results from mid-May thru the end of June, which is typically more of a downturn time, and these strong sales helped to keep prices at normal levels all through the month of June. The stronger retails helped us to maintain our costs to the retailers during this time period." —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

"I think on average we were up slightly, but the stores seem to be holding a point we can't go beyond. Yeah, we're still seeing some sales now; we're still moving product at some stores, where in years past we wouldn't have seen anything past July." —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

"They're practically the same as last year. They held throughout the season and just went down this month." —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

DO YOU HAVE YOUR OWN BRANDING PROGRAM

OR GROW BRANDED PRODUCT? HOW EFFECTIVE WAS IT THIS PAST SEASON?

"Branded product is not a huge percentage of what we grow because we can't get it unrooted. So we'll always go for unrooted when we can. I don't know if it's just in our area, but when I ask our salespeople what our customers say gardeners really recognize, the answer is Waves. They really don't know the others; growers do, but it doesn't really mean anything to them [consumers]." —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

"No, we don't have our own branding program, but I think we're a silver member of the Proven Winners collection; it was down just a little bit this year from last." —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.*

"We do a private label branding program for our retailers that went very well, and we also do Wave petunias — very good year — and Majestic Giants pansies (Sakata Seed America) — still strong in its third year. The only other branded item was the Susan G. Komen geranium program that supported the Breast Cancer Foundation. This cause-marketing program was very effective in driving sales, higher retails and a good cause." —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

"We try and stay away from it because of the cost in growing that product. When you're buying a licensed product, it is more expensive. We do grow some stuff, but we bring in a lot of unrooted cutting material. There's no way to get around some of that. But when we can, we try to do that without sacrificing on the product." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.* ♦



Growers mentioned that some staple items were not in as much demand as years past.

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“We do what’s called a Clackmas Select, but that’s just for one chain store. We grow patented product, but we don’t produce Clackmas items. We’ll do some Proven Winners, some S&G material but don’t really go out there and promote it as such.” —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

“We do our own branding, and it’s very effective. Our pots are all branded, etc. It looks nice on display; we’ve been doing that for about three years.” —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

WERE THERE ANY CHANGES IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS?

“The constant evolution of suppliers having to be more closely aligned with their retailers continues in our industry. We are now much more engaged in the development of garden center layouts, item selection, marketing programs and product maintenance at store level.” —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

“There were some customers demanding some specific color of pots and specific product, but that’s about it; no big changes.” —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

“No, no changes with the relationships. We have very strong relationships with our customers, and we do what we can to help them sell their product. But because it was such a bad season, a lot of people were upset about that. Some

tempers were short, but we knew that their being upset wasn’t directed at us. We’ve been working with a lot of our customers for 15-20 years now, and we’ve had good relationships in place that are open where we can communicate very well.” —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

“Not really, except they’re very demanding, as every year. Same thing, they all want a deal.” —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS SPRING?

“It was the weather; it was hard to get color — get blooms — on things early then try to keep the quality on them, waiting for them to sell.” —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

“The same as always — shipping. Shipping is the biggest challenge: being able to pull the orders and get them shipped and meeting the demand with the supply.” —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.*

“Basically, keeping the product looking nice. When it’s not selling as fast as you would like it to, it’s hard. We grow in stages in different greenhouses. So when it hits one stage of growth, and it looks too big and the temperature of the greenhouse is too warm, we drop the temperature of that greenhouse, which we can’t really do because we have more product coming in. It’s been a tough couple of years

because of the amount of work that’s going into maintaining the product and making it look nice. But that’s what’s necessary to make it good for sales.” —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

“The slow start followed by a huge kickoff to the season in our entire area all in the same weekend. We had all of our key metropolitan markets from the South to the North kick off the same weekend, which is different from past years where there is more of a staggered start.” —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

“Our biggest challenge is perennials; we seem to have an overabundance of all perennials. Also, I think with the wet weather, one of our problems was insects and disease — aphids and mold from the damp and cloudy weather. So, we were constantly applying chemicals.” —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

BASED ON THIS PAST YEAR, WHAT WILL YOU DO DIFFERENTLY NEXT YEAR?

“We’re going to try to do some lighting to help with daylength-sensitive crops to try to see if that’ll help us bring them into bloom a little faster. We are going to go down on some of the smaller sizes. And that’s been a trend, not just this year, but it was very noticeable this year.” —*Susan Harris, Moss Greenhouses, Jerome, Idaho*

“I think we’re going to make some structural improvements for shipping. Actually, we’ve ►

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already started making them, and we're going to continue." —*Erik Clesen, Clesen Brothers, South Elgin, Ill.*

"Based on this year, probably just watch the numbers of things that we're growing and not cut down on what we had because if it had been a good year, weather-wise, we would have easily sold the product faster than we did this year and probably more of it. I don't know if we'd change the numbers; we're always trying to weed out poor-growing varieties and bring in good stuff that is easy to maintain." —*Kirby Taranto, D&D Farms Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.*

"Change our mix to better align with shifts into more basic items and more higher-end premium items. Eliminate duplication among item sizes. We also want to continue to use more technology in our shipping and sales analysis departments to more effectively get the right product to the right place at the right time. And continue to expand our service programs, sales analysis ability and our trucking capacity to drive more business per square foot from the greenhouse and in the garden center at our retailers." —*Abe Vanwingerden, Metrolina Greenhouses, Huntersville, N.C.*

"At this point we're still evaluating that. I think



Shipping is always a problematic event for some growers, especially in the spring.

we'll cut down on some of the vegetative annuals and do a little bit more of the seed stuff." —*Jon Venske, Clackmas Greenhouses, Aurora, Ore.*

"Try and find some new things to offer. In fact, three of our employees (well one of our employees went to the trials in California) are going to the Ball trial gardens to look for new things." —*Nola Wagner, Wagner Greenhouses, Minneapolis, Minn.* GPN

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