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# Save the Geranium: A Call to Action

**T**hose of you in the South, where spring is already starting, are probably looking at your benches full of geraniums and wondering what I could possibly be talking about. The crop looks fine, orders are shipping on schedule and sales are starting to pick up...there aren't any problems with geraniums. Think again.

If you were one of almost 500 greenhouses that had to dump "suspect" geraniums over the past few months, you might have some idea what I'm talking about. But even if you weren't caught up in this latest *Ralstonia* scare, the situation with geraniums, USDA and our industry could have a major impact on you. Yes, there's a crisis brewing in our industry, and it could change the way most of us do business.

## THE HISTORY

Many of you may remember last spring's accidental importation of *Ralstonia solanacearum* race 3 biovar 2 on geranium cuttings originating in Kenya. Some of you may even know that the disease was imported a second time late last year; this time from Guatemala. What very few people know at this point is the overly drastic actions the USDA has taken to protect one industry, namely seed potatoes, at the expense of another industry, namely ornamental horticulture...us.

According to the USDA, there is no way to be sure that Goldsmith Plants, the company that imported the infected cuttings, is completely clear of the disease, and since this strain of *Ralstonia* is particularly virulent and can cause such devastation to solanaceous crops, e.g., tomatoes, tobacco and potatoes, they had no other option but to decertify this company, effectively stopping them from importing geranium cuttings for the remainder of this spring season. Future recertification and shipping is still being debated, but the USDA does not seem too anxious to move the process along. (For more details about Goldsmith's decertification, turn to Headlines on page 8.)

## MY TWO CENTS

Probably the hardest part of this episode for many growers — with our independent, stand-alone way of viewing business and life — has been the USDA having 100-percent control over how we run our businesses and a strong influence over how we operate as an industry. Since this pathogen is on the bioterrorism list, the USDA basically has complete control over how any occurrence is handled, and we have very little recourse if unsatisfied.

The USDA being in charge might not be so bad if they acted in the best interest of our industry, but I'm not sure they have. In these two instances of dealing with *Ralstonia*, the USDA's actions have not impressed me. I heard from too many greenhouse owners during the first outbreak — owners who were forced to dump excess geraniums and even crops not known to be hosts, and that was when we were supposed to be able to prove facilities were disease free and not have to dump. And now, with this outbreak, growers were not given an opportunity to show they had no disease. From one single infected plant, millions of plants will be destroyed before this is over — no questions, no excuses, no exceptions.

I had the luck, good or bad depending on how you look at it, of being on-site at the Goldsmith Guatemala facility when the news came from USDA that shipment for the spring season would not resume and saw firsthand the effect the announcement had on the company and its 450 employees. Everyone on site and those who learned afterward were stunned, partly because USDA had been working with Goldsmith, and all the other Central American geranium producers, to institute sanitary protocols, testing procedures and general guidelines for continued importation of geranium cuttings. But the main reason we were all so surprised was that the ruling just made no sense. One diseased plant out of the almost 20 million cuttings

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## next month...

- Ann Chase on controls for bacteria
- How to use Florel on plugs to delay unwanted flowering
- New builds and what they mean for the health of the industry

### plus...

- Trends in greenhouse structures
- NFF recap
- Delphinium production



## editor's report

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*Pictured top to bottom: Goldsmith's Guatemala geranium stock facility; standard protocol at all geranium stock facilities includes washing your hands at each greenhouse, including scrubbing under your nails with a nail brush; before being decertified to ship geraniums, Goldsmith was working with USDA to perfect a method for identifying *Ralstonia in leachate*; a worker at Goldsmith's geranium facility maintaining stock plants in case the clearance to ship came through — it never did. All these plants and the cuttings they contained have since been thrown away.*

that are shipped annually from that location? That's the number that halted shipment? Geraniums infecting potatoes? It could never happen. Theoretically, biologically, in someone's lab, sure, it could happen and seems pretty scary. In reality, a greenhouse crop infecting a potato field...how could a disease spread from two crops that are never intermingled? It can't! It just makes no sense!

So there I was, standing in the middle of a beautiful greenhouse range watching Goldsmith's Guatemalan management team realize their uncertain future, and in the middle of their sadness and fear, I couldn't help wonder what it would mean for our industry. This year, the geranium shortage was mostly covered (a good thing so as not to shrink the market for next year), but what about the future? How will this disease outbreak and the decertification of one of the major cutting suppliers affect geranium sales? The industry? Each of our businesses?

### THE FUTURE

We are at a triple disadvantage in this battle. First, the seed potato lobby is much larger than our own, which by the way exists only in the form of individual associations doing what they can with limited means. So I guess, really, anyone's lobby would be bigger than ours since we don't have a formal, industry-wide lobby. That's right, the third largest agriculture crop in the United States does not have a lobby — watermelons have a lobby but not floriculture. Second, this pathogen is listed on the bioterrorism list, which gives the USDA freedom to act at will and the excuse of "protecting the nation from terrorist threats." A very hard publicity battle to win on our part. Third, our industry is very fragmented and refuses to speak with a single voice, even when threatened as it is now. And rest assured, we are threatened and in the worst kind of slow, subtle way.

After the first infected cuttings

were discovered, the USDA considered a proposal to stop importation of geranium cuttings from offshore. The motion was killed, but this was not the first time it had been brought up, and I don't think we've seen the last of these kinds of quick-fix solutions.

I have been very disappointed by the lack of solidarity within the industry regarding this problem and by the inaction of those most in a position to protect our industry, namely the allied manufacturers, the wholesale growers and each and every garden retailer. You might think this company's decertification is of no concern to you; let them handle their own problems, but no imported geranium cuttings, the subsequent increase in cutting price and closer scrutiny by the USDA are things none of us want and something we can all help to prevent — at least at this stage.

I had a college professor with a great quote on his door about defending the rights of others. It went something like: I stood quiet when the Nazis came for the Jews because I am not Jewish. I said nothing when the Khmer Rouge came for the educators because I am not an educator...and when they came for me, there was no one left to stand up for me. I know that's a pretty emotional quote to paraphrase, but it seems so appropriate here — if we don't stand up for one another now, whether or not we had to dump plants or re-source cuttings, we'll lose our chance to do so in the future and to ask others to help.

### THE FINAL WORD

As you can see, I've usurped the space normally devoted to Roger Styer's "The Final Word." Given the gravity of the *Ralstonia* situation and the uncertain future it might cause, we thought it important to devote some extra space to covering the issue. Roger will be back next month with more production tips and musings about the industry and life in general. GPN

*Bridget C. White*