

# Fall is Upon Us



By Roger Styer

**N**ow that the kids are back in school and the fall season is upon us, it's time to start producing and selling mums, pansies, perennials and other fall crops. Oh, and by the way, you can't forget about growing your poinsettias! Some of you don't grow poinsettias anymore. Others are about to get in pre-finished poinsettias from another grower who didn't have enough to do over the summer. And for the crazy ones, you are carefully tending the poinsettias you potted up from cuttings the past couple of months.

## TIMING

September is a very critical month for many growers and garden centers. It is really the start of the fall selling season, even though stores have been selling mums, perennials and pansies since July. If the weather is still hot in September, the fall season gets off to a slow start. This is somewhat common in California and much of the Southeast. Not until a cool front comes through and consumers get a breath of cool air will they come back to the stores looking for fall plants. If

their spring/summer plantings still look good, they may wait even longer to replant.

Here in the Midwest, the fall season kicks off right after Labor Day weekend. The summer is officially over, pools are closed, kids are in school, and vacations are a distant memory. We sell fall crops from the beginning of September until Halloween. In the Front Range of the Rockies (Denver, Salt Lake City, etc.), the fall season starts in July and finishes by mid-September because stores are afraid of the first snowfall after that. In the Southeast, the fall season goes from mid-September until spring starts again. In California, the fall selling season may be delayed until October, due to hot weather and wildfires.

Regardless of when it starts and how long the fall season lasts, the big question is: Are you ready for it? I mean, do you have a good crop to sell or can you buy in from another producer? Have you cleaned up from spring and summer, and do you have your fall displays set up? Do you have your personnel trained to answer fall planting questions from consumers? And if you are a grower, have you hit your specs for mums, pansies and other crops, or did you have some problems here and there?

## PREDICTING THE WEATHER

In the heat, it is difficult to produce a quality pansy crop. The plants want to stretch, flop over, not branch and flower early but small. Once the weather cools down, the plants branch more, flower later and have larger flowers. That is the weather pansies like. Mums, on the other hand, can handle hot weather but may be delayed in flowering. Cool weather and short days promote early flowering but short plants. With all of the different varieties available, growers are sure to find ones that will do well in their area for the pot sizes they sell.

Other crops sold in the fall include flowering kale and cabbage, dianthus, snapdragons, petunias and perennials. All of these crops need to be of reasonable size (but not flopping over!) and in color to be sold. Flowering kale and cabbage will need cool nights (low 50s) to color up intensely, but should be controlled with a Bonzi drench at 2-4 ppm and worm-free. Dianthus, snaps and petunias will do

well if days are not too short for them to flower. Perennials left over from spring and summer should be cleaned up, not too tall, and still healthy in order to be sold. Oh, did I mention that they need to be in flower as well?

If your crops do not look good to you, imagine what they look like to a consumer. This is important for the beginning of the fall season, when it is tough to have good-looking plants. Don't hold onto junk, when you can bring in better-looking stuff to replace it. It is difficult to put your best foot forward in the beginning of the fall season when the weather is still hot, but you better get in step quickly thereafter or forget about selling fall crops.

## SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Are your customers looking for something different besides mums and pansies? How much more of the minor crops are you willing to produce? Can you offer something different, such as new crops or new combinations? Have you noticed that Proven Winners' Fall Magic program now contains more blooming plants? People still want color even in the fall, so provide them with different options. Remember, combo containers should be different than what was available in spring and summer, so work with different crops and colors appropriate for fall. And, what can you offer for Halloween? This holiday is now the second most decorated holiday in the United States. Besides pumpkins, cornstalks and gourds, there are a lot of different colors and combinations that can be set up just for Halloween.

So, with the fall season upon us, it's a great time to be outdoors. I consider fall to be my second favorite season, after spring. I love the smell, the leaves turning color, the crisp days and nights, and football in the air. I don't mind working in the yard at all. I'm sure your customers feel the same way. So, provide them the color they want and need, and help them be successful. By the way, don't forget about those poinsettias while you are having all this fun! GPN

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