

# Reviewing Spring

# 2007

To get a better understanding of this year's selling season, we surveyed a group of growers across the country. Despite erratic weather and rising input costs, sales were strong and varieties performed well overall.

**By Jasmina Radjevic**

It is never easy to predict how successful your spring season will be due to many factors such as weather, consumer preferences and input costs. But each year, *GPN* surveys a group of growers to gauge what kinds of problems occurred and what can be done to resolve them. We also try to find out what varieties performed well and kept the customers coming back for more. This year, we surveyed about 75 growers and

learned that overall, the season went well, aside from a few familiar hurdles.

## Struggling With Weather and Energy

More than 30 percent of the growers we surveyed cited weather-related issues as their biggest challenge this past spring. Because of colder temperatures early in spring, some growers were forced to hold product longer than anticipated. Doug Cole of D.S. Cole Growers in Loudon, N.H., shared, "January and February are very tough for young plants as far as shipping goes. Because of cold temperatures, we had to hold product longer due to weather constraints. In late April, when finished product kicks in for wholesale centers to garden centers, we had some weather issues when it got cold again."

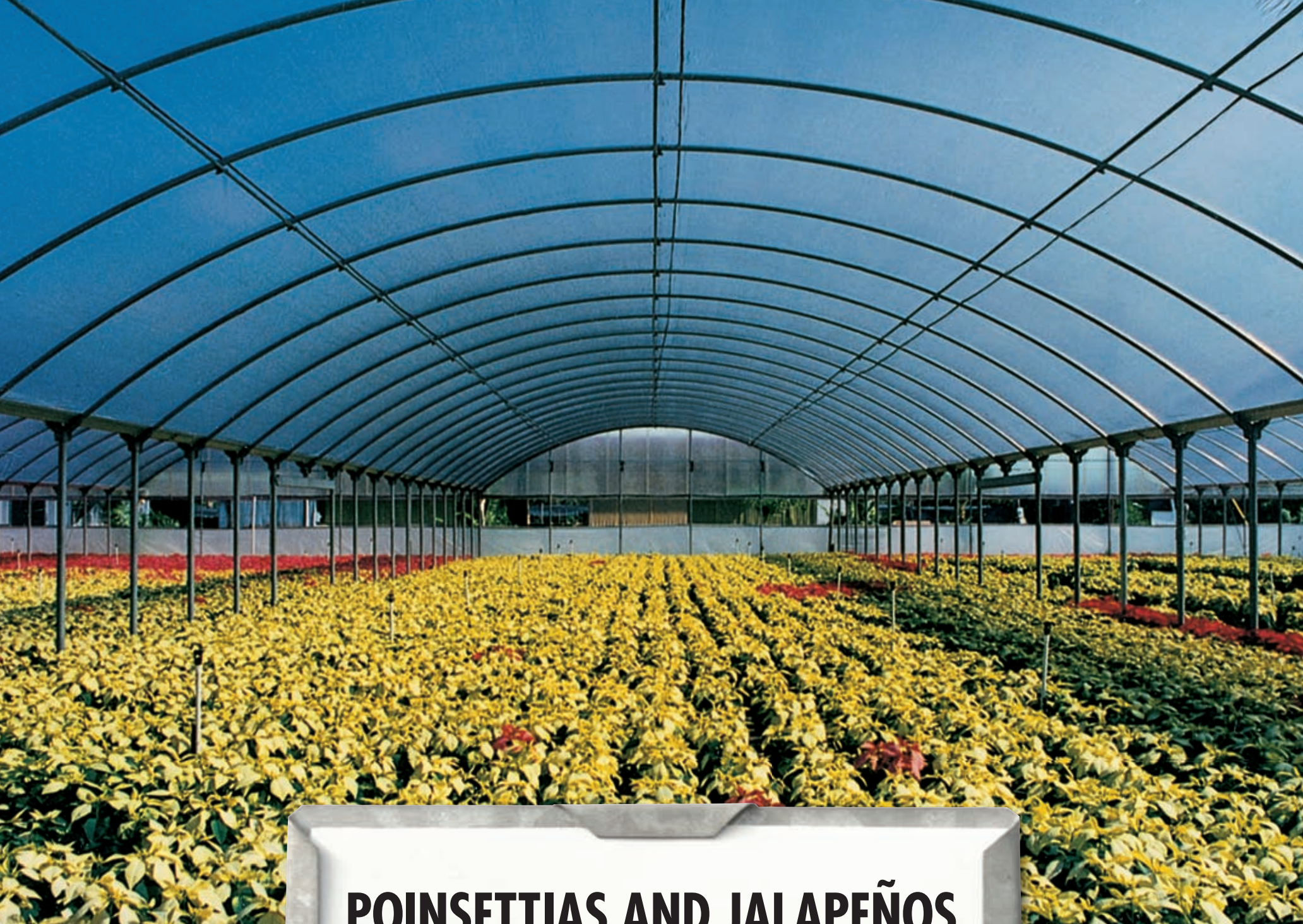
But not all growers struggled with weather. For example, Bobby Barnitz, Bob's Market & Greenhouses, Mason, W.Va., stated, "The timing of the weather actually worked to our benefit because at the end of March we had some warm weather that allowed us to ship out some of our early finished products," he said. However, it wasn't a perfect spring. Barnitz did confess to having two bad weeks in April. "[Weather] is the one factor, even though we grow in a controlled environment, that still determines how our season is going to be — either growing, selling or a combination of both."

Overall, weather and its impact on production varied across the country. Nearly 40 percent of respondents said weather had a positive impact, about 33 percent said it had a negative impact and 27 percent said weather had no impact at all.

Other challenges growers faced this spring included energy costs, meeting product demand, hiring quality help and struggling with competition. After weather-related issues,



*Despite a few cool weeks early in the season, growers were able to move product off the racks quickly.*



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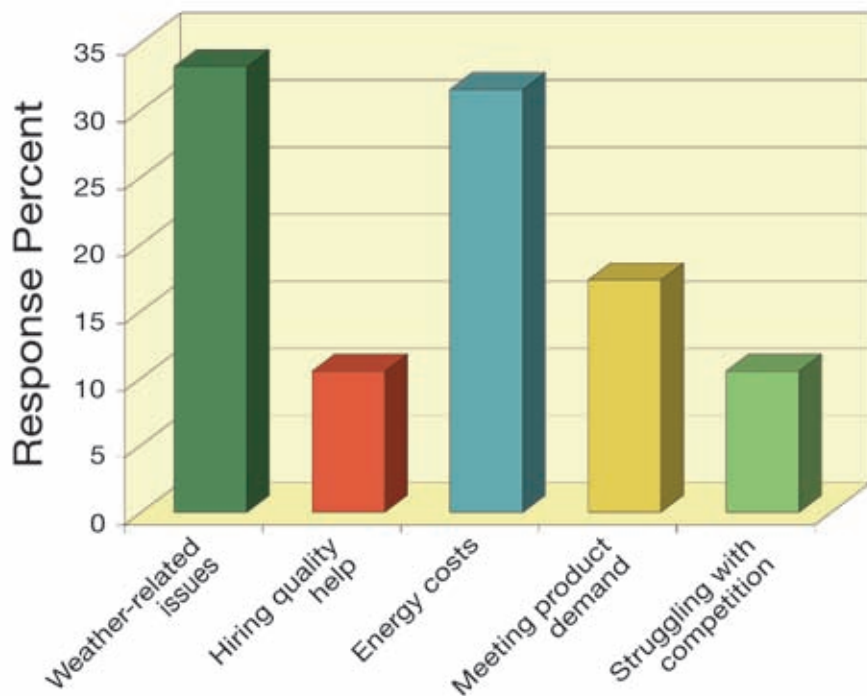
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### What was your biggest challenge this spring?



dealing with energy costs was the second most popular response. For many growers, cooler weather meant higher heating costs. However, not all growers were affected the same way. According to Niles Reese of Glass Corner Greenhouses, Grand Rapids, Mich., "Energy costs probably did not affect our operation as much as last year." Barnitz, on the other hand, said costs were substantially more than last year because of six weeks of cold weather in February and March.

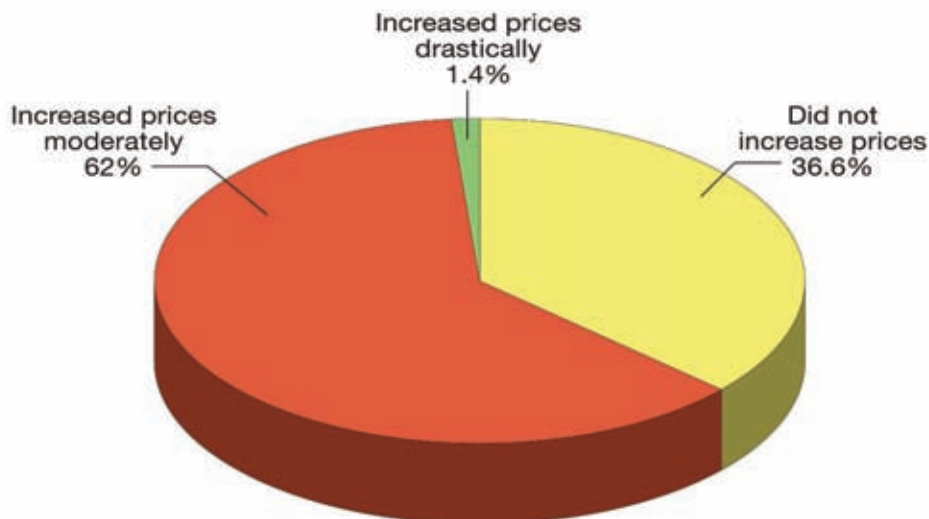
#### Increased Prices

With input costs increasing every year, it is no surprise that 63 percent of respondents admitted to raising prices. According

to Cole, prices in his operation were raised and held throughout the season. "We're at a point now where we're only making minor gains in increases — very minor increases." Barnitz's business also increased prices, by about 3 percent. For the most part, it seems like growers' prices held throughout the season across the board. Nearly 48 percent of respondents said there was no need to discount items, and about 35 percent discounted items late in the season.

Of the 63 percent of growers who increased prices, only 1 percent said they increased prices drastically. Barnitz sees this as a problem in the floriculture industry. "We have to become better business people,"

### How were your prices this year compared to last year?



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As energy costs continue to rise along with other input costs, some growers are finding the need to increase their own prices.

he said. "People have to realize if input costs are going up, you have to raise your prices, and there is not enough of that done." He believes too many growers don't take into consideration the cost of doing business and remain reluctant to raise prices, in spite of factors like minimum wage increases.

### Recent Immigration Issues

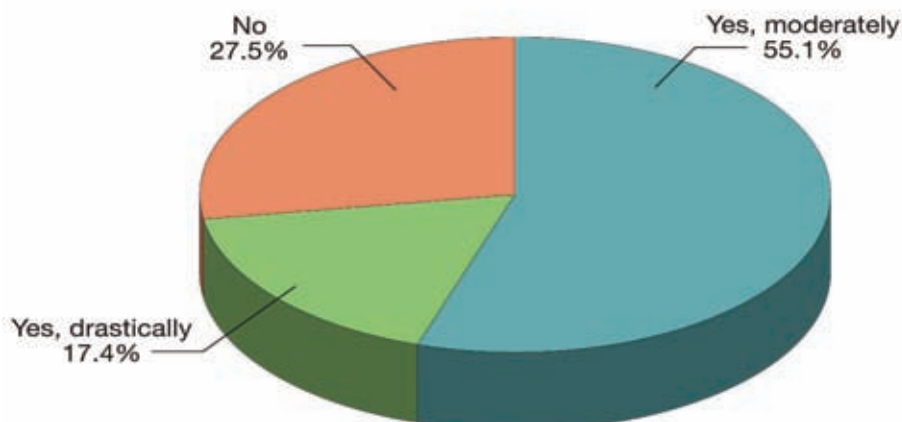
Although many growing operations employ a large number of immigrant workers, only about 13 percent of respondents said the recent immigration debate had an effect on their operations this spring. Earlier this year, it seemed like Congress was about to reach an agreement regarding immigration. But as of yet, no decision has been made regarding the future of immigration in this country. Reese summed it up when he said, "Certainly not now [the immigration debate] hasn't affected us, but it could have a

huge impact down the road depending on which way it goes."

Cole explained that immigration has not affected his operation at all because his operation is located in an area that has few Hispanic immigrants. "We have a number of refugees — Yugoslavians, Bosnians, Croats — that are fantastic workers," he said. "They are totally legal, with refugee status. We have just enough to supplement with our locals. This is definitely not the same kind of immigration issue."

Although his operation is one of the largest growing spaces in the country, Barnitz stated, "We are probably one of the few on that list that does not have Hispanic labor." Like Cole's operation, this is primarily because it is located in an area with very little Hispanic immigration. "We've always been fortunate to be able to hire local people," he said, "but that is becoming more of a challenge" as the Hispanic

### Did you discount products?



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population has recently increased in the area. Barnitz said he is considering tapping into this group as his business moves forward in the next few years, but as of right now, the immigration debate has not affected his operation. He is, however, keeping an eye on it for the future.

### Varieties That Made a Difference

It is never easy to guess which varieties will outsell others. Sometimes you plan on one variety being the big seller, but another one turns out being more successful. That is why we asked

growers to share which varieties surprised them this year.

According to Cole, the zinnia Magellan series by Goldsmith was extremely successful for his business. "Even though I'm not a propagator of them as a finished plant, they were really popular." Many

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begonia varieties were popular as well, but they usually plan for that each year. Other items that moved well were foliage items, such as rex begonias, succulents and ferns. Although they are not color items, Cole said there was good demand for these types of items.

Cole said the Bonfire begonia was a variety he tried for the first time this year that he will definitely grow again next year. "It was a little tough to make a really good 4-inch pot," he explained. "It was best for hangers, combos, finished pots and summer pots."

For Barnitz, cernua 'Live Wire' by PanAmerican Seed was a new variety that he would like to grow again next year. This new fiberoptic grass is available in seed form, and performed well in its first year.

The Elatior begonia was a big seller this spring, according to Reese. Another popular variety was Proven Winner's euphorbia 'Diamond Frost'. New Guinea impatiens, on the other hand, were not as popular as other years. "It was kind of confusing because in years past they had done very well, but this year they were just a little slow," explained Reese. **GPN**

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