

Spring Season 2006 — How Was It?

Stephen Barlow summed up the spring season for many growers when he said, “Overall, our season was OK. It wasn’t great; it wasn’t horrible. It was somewhere in the middle.”

By Tim Hodson

Ask any group of growers how their spring growing seasons were and you usually get many different answers. But this year you would be amazed at how similar their answers really are. Every grower is different, but their experiences this spring were pretty comparable — not too bad.

The weather played games with just about everyone. Combination baskets really took off this year. Bedding flat sales were soft. Energy costs were up, and labor issues were tough. But overall, the growers I talked to said this year was pretty decent. As one grower told me, “I’m not buying a brand new Corvette this year, but I don’t have to sell the car I own either.”

Take a look at what some of your

peers had to say about spring 2007. How did your spring differ from theirs? Hopefully, you can learn from their experiences and begin planning for a successful 2007.

What was your biggest challenge this spring?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

Moving to a new location. We also had a wet spring. It slowed us down for a while but then we picked it back up. Between [the wet spring] and the move, it kind of slowed us down. But we knew what we were getting into.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

This spring our biggest challenges were finding quality help and the weather.

Peter Konjoian, Konjoian Greenhouses, Andover, Mass.

Winter and early spring production weather cooperated, which resulted in very nice quality plants. However, record rains in mid-May and early June dampened spring sales. An eroding customer base continues to raise concern as well.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

For us, the biggest challenge was labor. We had what we thought was all of the labor that we needed. We had a contract crew, in addition to our regular people. But there were issues with the contractor as opposed to the people. The crew was arguing with him [the contractor] and taking it out on us.

Which crops were more popular this year than you had anticipated?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

Vegetables were really popular for us this year, which was surprising. I thought they would be popular but not that popular. Peppers and things of that nature flew out the door. Petunias and things of that nature are always popular, but I was surprised that vegetables were so popular this year. [Vegetables] are a big chunk of our business but not our biggest — flats/bedding and hanging baskets, those types of things are our biggest sellers because we deal with the chain stores.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.



Good weather early in the spring allowed many growers to fill their greenhouses with a variety of different crops.

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Calibrachos were more popular than I anticipated this year. I attribute it to the new varieties that are coming out and color performance. We use them in combinations a lot. Customers really like them.

Peter Konjoian, Konjoian Greenhouses, Andover, Mass.

Mixed baskets, containers and herbs continued to maintain profitability for us this year.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

Our exotic begonia collection was far more popular than we anticipated. It is so totally unique, and we are the only ones that have them. We have figured out how to produce them in large numbers. Our hiemalis begonias were also very popular.

Which crops were not as popular as you anticipated? Why?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

It is hard to say because we did pretty good this year. It was more the accent plants and border plants. Celosia was one that didn't do very well for us.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

Geraniums weren't as popular this year. I think there was just a change in customers. Like you are hearing all over the industry, the baby boomers aren't buying as much. You know the baby boomers were the geranium people back in the sixties and seventies. They bought geraniums. Now we have a new type of clientele that doesn't quite care so much about that red geranium. People now want more instant gratification and are finding it in larger size products or earlier in the season.

Peter Konjoian, Konjoian Greenhouses, Andover, Mass.

Geraniums, New Guinea impatiens and traditional bedding packs were off somewhat this spring. Some monoculture hanging baskets, the more common items, also moved slowly.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

Non-Stop begonias. It was the first time we have seen an erosion in the numbers of Non-Stop begonias. It is 35 years old, and it is not the easiest plant or the best performer in the garden. I just think people are not willing to have anything that is not a superb performer. I think that is why you are seeing hiemalis begonias and exotic begonias and things like that taking their place.

What is the one new variety you tried for the first time this spring that you will grow again next year?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

I don't know if we really tried anything [crop-wise] new this year because of the move. We didn't want any more surprises than we were already going to have. I think we played it pretty safe. But we are doing a pretty big summer program for one of the chain stores.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

Definitely that calibrachoa — that "Callie Deep Yellow — the Fischer variety; I couldn't keep it on [the bench]

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

I've got to say leucanthemum 'Broadway Lights'. I think it is the best leucanthemum out there. It is a unique color. It is very vigorous. It is just a beautiful variety. It is a winner, an absolute winner.

How did the weather in your area affect production this spring?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

We already had a wet spring, and now we are having a really hot summer. In July we have had 11 or 12 days of 100°+ days. It's been super hot. It was interesting how it was rainy and cooler [in the spring] and now it is just blistering hot.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

Obviously, the rain was an issue. We had a great April, a fantastic, huge April. The beginning of May was great. Then it rained for a couple of days, and then it got really hot. If customers didn't get their plants in the beginning of April, they just kind of gave up when it got warm out. We did rebound well in June.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

Our weather was absolutely wonderful through the spring. The weather was very mild and very dry — up until very early June when it became extremely wet, and we actually had some flooding in the area. At that point, it caused all sorts of problems for us. It has since been horrible.

How were your prices this year compared to last? Did they hold throughout the season?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah ▶

Bonzi® tip of the month

Bonzi Tank Mix With Insecticides And Fungicides

Bonzi® is one of the most commonly used chemicals in greenhouse and nursery production and is applied to a large number of different crops. In some situations, it would be more efficient to apply Bonzi and another product at the same time. At times, both a Bonzi drench and a separate drench of another product within a few days could potentially result in more irrigation than desired for proper substrate moisture management.

Bonzi is compatible with many commonly used insecticides (such as Flagship®) and fungicides (such as Subdue Maxx®). Users unfamiliar with a particular tank mix should check the compatibility of Bonzi with other products before use by conducting a "jar test." Take a quart jar or other clear container and add the chemicals in the correct order and the desired concentration. Make sure the first product is completely dispersed before adding the second product and then let stand for at least five minutes. If the combination remains mixed for the time expected to complete the application or can be remixed readily, it is physically compatible. Use the same procedure for adding required ingredients to a spray tank or drench solution. If the two products will be mixed in a stock tank and injected into a water line, it is important to test physical compatibility and expected holding time in the stock tank. In some cases separate injectors for each product may be desirable.

Make sure Bonzi and the other products are both labeled for the target crop, method of application, and equipment used. Also, make sure both products are being applied at the proper rate and time for the crop being treated. Users should note that the desired application rate for Bonzi varies widely from crop to crop compared to many commonly used insecticides and fungicides.

In some situations, application strategies make tank mixes undesirable. One example is a low volume spray that may work well with some products but is not a good method for applying Bonzi. Some commonly used insect growth regulators call for low volume drench applications, which is not compatible with the higher volumes that may be needed with Bonzi.

Bonzi has a wide margin of safety on most ornamentals and should be mixed only with other products with equal safety profiles. If you do not have experience with a particular tank mix, test the mixture on a small number of plants to determine any adverse effects before making large-scale applications.

Earlier this year, Syngenta asked Bonzi users to enter a contest by sending in their best Bonzi tip. Below is the winning entry from Chris Hammons at Timberline Nursery, Hillister, Tx.

"When applying Bonzi as a drench, I feel that the plant should be at a point where the plant needs to be irrigated (not stressed or wilted). This makes the active ingredient readily available for the plant to absorb. In turn quicker results and movement of Bonzi into the plant. I also incorporate fertilizer with my Bonzi drenches so my employees can monitor the color of irrigation to ensure that the injectors are working properly and Bonzi is evenly distributed to the crops."



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We pushed for price increases, but we really didn't get them. Our prices pretty much stayed where they were from the season before. But I do know that next year we will get the price increase. We didn't discount all that many items, so that was another nice aspect. Our color bowls and color pots did really well for us, so we didn't discount any of them. That was nice.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

I thought we did a good job on prices because we raised our prices on several items that we knew we could. We knew we couldn't raise bedding flat prices, but we were able to on things like combinations and some of our premium hanging baskets. We did hold our prices for a long time. We try not to put things on sale too early. We really stuck to that this year.

Peter Konjoian, Konjoian Greenhouses, Andover, Mass.

We increased prices, generally, across the board with the exception of commodity items such as 4½-inch geraniums, New Guinea impatiens and perennials.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

We raised our prices across the board on every single item we grow. In some cases significant price increases. We almost never discount. We hold our prices from the beginning of the season through the end of the season. The only way you get a better price from us is to pre-book large quantities — firm orders. Other than that you pay list prices. I make no bones about it. I tell people, "You can always buy some place cheaper, but not like this and not this consistently." If we hear somebody has raised the price around us and they are either at or near us [price-wise], then we go up.

On the Non-Stop begonias, I may have hit that threshold on pricing. I get more money than anybody in the country that I've heard of. I think I finally hit the breaking point.

Based on this past spring, what will you do differently next year?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

I think we will do some different mixes. Overall, we will probably try and do more vegetables than we did this year. [It] was surprising, but that was the big push at a lot of garden centers. We will prob-

ably look at doing some things that are more economical and environmentally friendly like soil pots or something like that, so we are making the chain stores look good. We have purchased an Ellepot machine, so we will be able to do our own soil mixes as well.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

We are going to go even deeper into combinations and less into bedding flats. I feel like the bedding flat market is in a downward spiral. We definitely will do more of the combinations. They are just huge. Customers are looking for something that they can walk right in the door and walk right out with really fast. We are definitely going to increase production on that.

Peter Konjoian, Konjoian Greenhouses, Andover, Mass.

Production cutbacks will continue next year. We have been downsizing for four years to jettison production efforts not generating sufficient profit.



Dealing with immigration issues has been a major concern for many growers this year.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

I will *definitively* refine my product offering. I will eliminate many varieties from our product line. I will absolutely pare down on items that we have to hustle to sell. There are just so many items out there, yet the bulk of sales come in specific areas. We will concentrate on those areas to serve our needs as well as our customers' needs. We will definitely increase basket sales. We are looking at whole new product lines of perennials and items like that that will bloom the first year. That will give our customers some new options for production. ♦

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How did energy costs affect your operations this year?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

Energy cost-wise, I don't think Utah is as bad as other places in the nation. We did not get nailed as bad as some other people. With our move we did things differently with our boiler that will allow us to save some of that energy. For example, we have a heat exhaust stack, so we are catching our heat exhaust and pumping it back and heating our floors. We also have a CO₂ converter as well to pump CO₂ into the plants. I'd say we are about 95-percent efficient whereas before we were in the 80-85 percent [range]. We have gained efficiency so I think we will do better this year. At least that's the plan.



One of the varieties that performed really well this spring was Proven Winners' leucanthemum 'Broadway Lights'. (Photo: Proven Winners)

didn't affect us as bad as we thought they would. But they did. Our gas prices were 65 percent over last year. We did cut back on a lot of crops and chose to buy them in. We have already locked in our gas prices for next year. We are able to budget now so we know exactly how much we are going to spend on gas next year so we can determine our prices from that.

Peter Konjoian, Konjoian Greenhouses, Andover, Mass.

Energy costs have been challenging to manage. Fuel oil in the Northeast was no fun to deal with. We tried to raise prices to compensate.

Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

It was terrible. We were better than most, but we had locked in [fuel prices] very early. So we were actually paying gallon for gallon the same

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

This year we were fortunate to have a warm winter so energy costs

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as we did the year before. What we are real concerned about is what is going to happen this year because everyone was expecting energy prices to go back down, and it clearly is not. We are already changing our spreadsheet to reflect the new pricing on fuel. We are going to add 40 percent for our fuel costs over last year and plug that into the spreadsheet. I still contend that I'd much rather control labor input than fuel [costs]. I don't have any control over fuel.

How has the recent immigration debate affected your operations?

Brad Gold, Pineae Greenhouses, Inc., Ogden, Utah

So far it hasn't affected us because we try and go the extra mile and make sure [every employee] is a legal immigrant. Is it going to affect us in the future? Certainly. It has been a real fight to get the extra crew. We went with more temp services this year than in the past just because it was hard to keep [immigrant workers] because landscape groups came in and offered them more money. I think it is going to be interesting next year to see where we go with these issues. We haven't lost a lot of our crews, but we have lost some. But overall, I'd say we are OK.

Stephen Barlow, Barlow Flower Farm, Sea Girt, N.J.

It has affected our operations very much. We are looking at ways that we can find legal immigrants because it is so hard for us to find legal immigrants right now. We are working with a company that will have legal immigrants come work for us for 10 months and then they can go home for 10 months. We are looking for long-term legal immigrants. We are not as large as some of the huge growers, so it doesn't affect us quite as much. But it is something we have to be proactive with because [if the government] comes in and slaps you with a \$20,000 fine, it will run some people out of business.

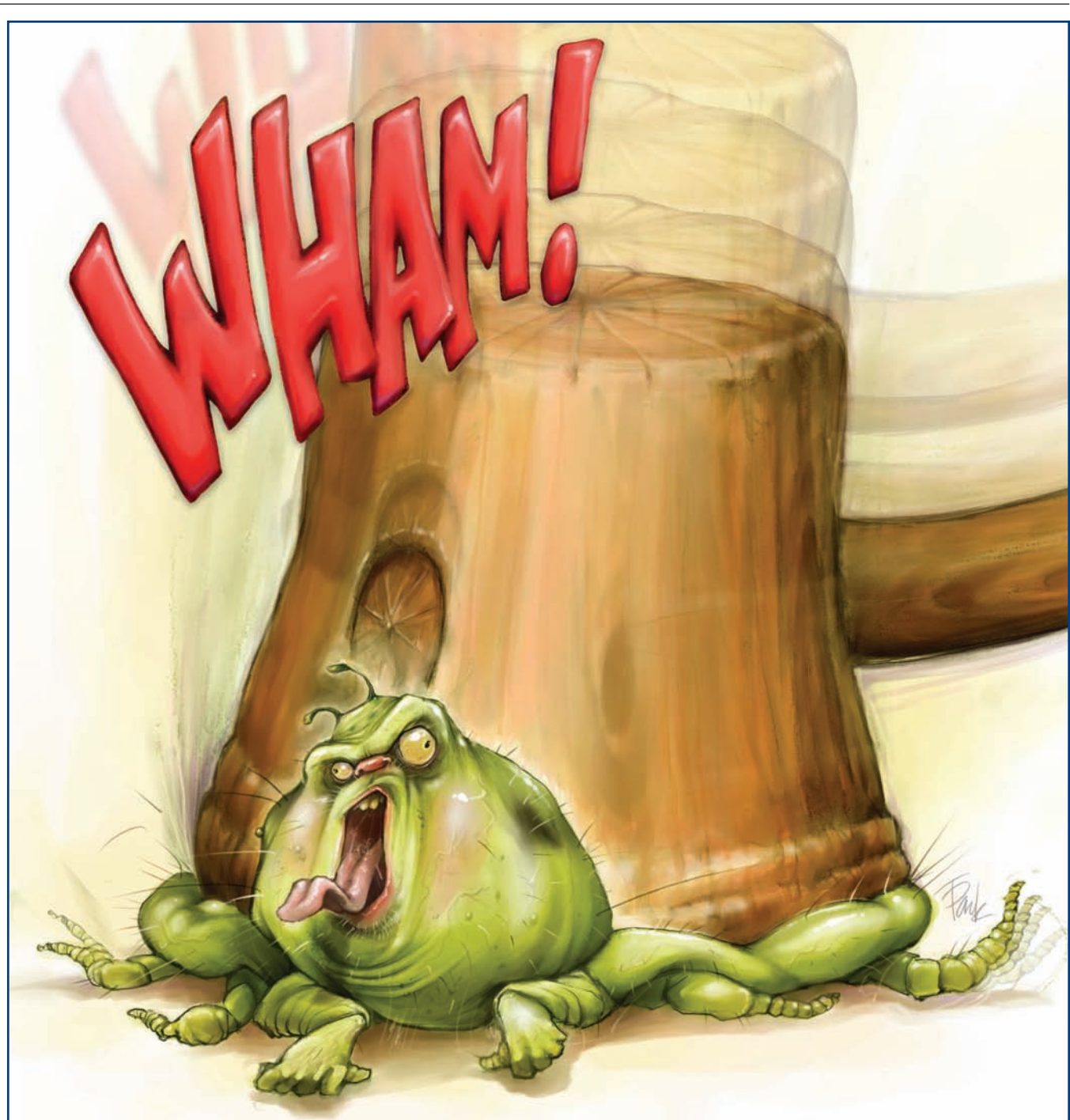
Lloyd Traven, Peace Tree Farm, Kintnersville, Pa.

The problem has not been the people, the problem has been the broker. We were not able to use the regular person that we used [in the past], then we had to deal with some other guy who was not paying the people. We were giving

them [the crew] the check to give to the broker, and he wasn't giving them the money. So they refused to work. So we laid the law down with our original broker. **GPN**

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