



PLANTS ON THE MOVE

Making room for safety

On nursery loading docks, COVID-19 changed everything

BY BILL GOLOSKI

UNCERTAINTY AND PANIC ABOUT the COVID-19 pathogen quickly took hold of shipping companies and nursery loading docks across the United States earlier this year.

“It was the third week of March — that Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,” said Matt Frederick, logistic coordinator and operations manager of **K&M Distribution Inc.** (Rogue River, Oregon), which primarily serves the nursery industry. “It was a beast of a week for all of us.”

Executive orders were coming down from each state’s governor, often prohibiting the movement of people and goods to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. They cast a dark cloud over transportation and logistics companies, and the nurseries they served.

Like the flick of a switch, the pandemic had arrived.

“Nobody knew anything,” Frederick said. “States were shutting down — we were on an hour-by-hour standby with customers from New Hampshire down to Florida, all the way out to Colorado and everywhere in between.”

Al Herzog, traffic manager at wholesale tree grower **J. Frank**

Schmidt & Son Co. (Boring, Oregon) did not initially know how much impact the virus would have on his nursery, and how it shipped trees.


“When this all started, we all thought this would last a couple of weeks or a month,” he said. “We didn’t realize it was going to last this long, and still be nowhere close to being over.”

Like the flick of a switch, the pandemic had arrived checked in at the loading dock.

Protecting employees

Thanks to the OAN’s lobbying efforts, Oregon nurseries were deemed essential businesses and stayed in operation during the shutdown.

“Thank God nurseries were exempt,” said Dale Parra, who coordinates logistics at **Truck Transportation Services** in Wilsonville, Oregon. “That would have been a disaster.”

State officials soon began issuing new safety guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus for agricultural workers. Their social distancing guidance required crew members to work at 

Plants on the move: Making room for safety

Previous page: The sign at the entrance to J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. was changed to direct drivers to a mobile check-in process.

PHOTO BY NANCY BULEY, J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

Below: Load crews form a line to fill J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. a truck. PHOTO BY JEFF LAFRENZ, J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

Opposite page: Products are widely spaced on the loading dock at J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. PHOTO BY JEFF LAFRENZ, J. FRANK SCHMIDT & SON CO.

least six feet apart.

Following these guidelines wasn't as difficult for planting crews spread out in the field. For workers loading nursery stock onto refrigerated trucks, however, it created a significant bottleneck for shipping procedures. Immediate changes were needed at the loading dock.

Adjusting an operation's process would typically involve a sit-down conversation with many folks on the nursery. But, in this scenario, J. Frank Schmidt's traffic manager, farm manager, shipping clerk — and pretty much everybody in upper management — had to work things out through phone calls and emails.

"It was very unusual, to be honest," Herzog said. "People were told to work from home if they could, so a lot of people weren't here. But, pretty much everybody was involved in the discussion."

The team had to think on their feet. Onsite managers and crew members began pitching ideas back and forth, figuring out the best way to keep everyone safe.

"It was not just the trucking — it was everything," Herzog, explained, including a company-wide social/safe distancing policy that requires masks or bandanas be worn in all situations where a worker can potentially come within six feet of another person.

J. Frank Schmidt loads at two locations in Boring, Oregon, and operates three farms. Movement between them had to be cut off. If workers at one farm were to get infected, it was important to contain the outbreak to just that one farm. Consequently, the container farm crew needed to stay at their farm, the bareroot crew at their farm, and the same for the seedling farm.

"Each manager was on top of it, and just did what needed to be done," Herzog said. "It was pretty interesting to watch happen, and how quick it happened."

Changes on the dock

Overall, there were no physical changes to J. Frank Schmidt's loading docks, aside from the mental adjustment

for workers to keep their safe distances.

"When a load is spread out on pallets around the staging area, it takes a good 75 to 100 feet long," Herzog said. "It's not hard to keep people spread out."

The nursery adjusted their loading crews so there would be one person to walk the trees into the trailer, and one person inside to arrange the load.

According to Frederick, other nurseries faced the same dilemma and responded similarly.

"Some companies have trimmed their loading crews down to three people, instead of five," he said. "It creates more distance in the back of the trailer when loading."

Some nurseries were also cutting off areas of the loading dock, Frederick added.

"Every shipper is different depending on plant varieties, sizing, and staff, but a couple of common COVID-19 distancing practices have been more separation on loading docks," Frederick said.

For example, a nursery with three loading docks in a row might block off





the middle one and leave it empty. It gives anywhere between a 10–15-foot barrier between the staff at the loading docks.

Accepting visitors

Drivers — those still on the road and not subject to quarantine — were arriving at nurseries from out-of-state locations far and wide. Because of this, they posed a unique risk of Coronavirus transmission. Consequently, each business started looking for ways to limit contact between arriving drivers and their workers.

“Nurseries were just trying to keep their employees — and the drivers — safe,” Parra said. “If a driver passes it to

an employee, the next thing you know, the nursery will be missing a loading crew. It’s a smart call.”

There was no quick solution.

“We went through stages at the very beginning,” Herzog said. “We ordered extra pens, so when the driver signed in, we would just give them the pen so we didn’t have to clean up anything.”

Frederick said it had also been the case with other nurseries as well. If the driver had to sign the paperwork, there often would be a rotating pen station. “That’s been the only hand-to-hand contact since March,” he said.


J. Frank Schmidt also installed

Plexiglas screens at the check-in window. But soon, since health officials were still unsure how the virus was spread, even disposable pens started to feel risky.

“Finally, we said ‘No, we don’t want any physical contact with the driver,’” Herzog said.

The drivers were asked to stay away from the clerk and crews.

The nursery began checking drivers in over the phone. The arriving drivers would see a stop sign when they entered the property. “It tells the drivers to please stay in their trucks and call a phone number instead of coming into the building and checking in,” Herzog said. >>





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Plants on the move: Making room for safety

Other nurseries took similar steps, and relayed the information out to their shipping partners.

“It was pretty much one week where all of our shippers communicated with us to figure out exactly what their policies were,” Frederick said.

In Frederick’s experience, the process at most nurseries was well planned. “Our truck pulls up in the driveway, someone comes out from the office with paperwork on them, tells them which dock to back into, and then hands them over their paperwork,” he said.

J. Frank Schmidt found it smooth going. “In all actuality, everyone really likes it,” Herzog said. “Before COVID-19, we weren’t very well set up for the drivers when they checked in — they had to walk a ways. Now they just call. It’s very simple.”

Once assigned to a dock, the drivers

typically are asked to stay put.

“95% of our drivers are staying in the truck,” Frederick said.

It’s a practical solution.

A driver used to be able to walk around the nursery property, check on the loading crew, and see how things are going. COVID-19 stopped that.

“Nurseries are also staggering loading times to accommodate this change,” Frederick said. “They’re no longer queuing up trucks for 8 a.m. pick-up. They will have one at 8 a.m. and the next load ready for 1 p.m.”

He’s also had some shippers request the driver call anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour from pick up, to give them notice to get the loading crew ready from another job. K & M has dropped a lot of trailers off this year, and will get called back about an hour before the load is complete.

“We encourage the drivers to leave,” Herzog said. “When we try to get them to come out the afternoon before, we’re actually trying to help them in a sense, because nursery stock does take so long to load.”

Longer to load

Load times are inevitably longer with smaller crews.

“I definitely think COVID has contributed to longer load times, which we’ve expressed to our drivers before about the situation,” Parra said. “When loading, divers could be in there four or five hours at a time. We let them know that they’re not going to have so many people on their truck.”

“It’s taken about 20% longer to load the trucks,” Herzog said. “We staggered the teams and we can only load one tree at a time. It is probably the biggest, most time-consuming change we’ve had to make.”

Frederick’s drivers haven’t been stalled too much by the longer load times.

“For the most part loading times have been very similar to other years for us,” Frederick said. Every load is different, where you can load a full truck of B&B in 2 hours, it will take 4–7 hours to load 10,000 1-gallon containers.”

Another way shippers have been helping this season is more racking. That way on the receiving end you will only need one person to pull the racked carts onto the truck, as opposed to 3–5 people on manual deliveries.

“Overall, I would give nurseries an ‘A’ for adapting to circumstances and making the changes while still getting the drivers out in fairly good times,” Parra said. “The first runs were a little crazy, but they got the kinks worked out.”

It wasn’t easy, but the changes made have been for the better.

“Each shipper we work with took the bull by the horns and immediately put safety actions in place,” Frederick said. “Growers are continuing to evolve to do the best they can to provide safety for employees during an uncertain time, and everyone was prompt in making adjustments.” ☺

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