



Getting the load on the road

Sound planning and strong communication helps complex loading processes run more smoothly

Farm Manager Kevin Borts checks loads organized and lined up for shipping at Bizon Nursery in Hubbard, Oregon. Each row of plants is a shipment and shipments are marked with a tag to identify it (below). PHOTOS BY VIC PANICHKUL

BY MITCH LIES

With the variety of sizes, shapes and load configurations involved in nursery shipping, and with the fact that shippers are moving living plant across great distances, coordinating shipping in nursery is fraught with logistical challenges.

Careful planning, good communication and loading efficiency are critical steps to getting a truck in and out of a nursery and back on the road as quickly as possible, and this efficiency starts well in advance of a truck pulling into a yard.

Todd Nelson, co-owner of **Bountiful Farms Nursery Inc.** (Woodburn, Oregon), a wholesale grower of pot-in-pot and B&B grafted ornamentals, topiary plant material, sculptured art forms and unique plant material, said he likes to have a load on the dock, counted, walked twice and tagged at least three days in advance of shipping.

“We ask that our customers give us the ship date upon order and so we know what our customers want, and we are prepared for that months in advance,” Nelson said.

Even in summer months, when temperatures are not conducive to leaving plants on a dock for long stretches, the nursery has loads staged one day in advance, he said.

Veteran nursery freight broker Joel Mandel of **Northland Express Transport** in Troutdale, Oregon, said most nurseries operate in a similar fashion, having material staged and ready to load when a truck arrives. But, he said, there are times when a weather event or other occurrence can throw a wrench in the timing.

“Every so often, the driver is there waiting to get loaded and product isn’t ready,” Mandel said. “Maybe it is a wet week, and the crew needs additional >>



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Forklift driver Antonio Moreno lifts a tree into a waiting truck while another worker steadies it at Bizon Nursery. Shipments are organized near the dock and staged for loading in the order of shipping to make loading trucks more efficient. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHRUL

time out in the field, but in the meantime, the driver is just sitting there.”

When that happens, Mandel said, the best step for a nursery is to be honest with the driver and let them know that the loading is going to take longer than expected. This transparency will help maintain a good relationship with the driver and the freight broker.

It's also helpful to contact the broker so the broker can adjust the receiver's schedule as needed.

Matthew Frederick, logistics coordinator for **K&M Distribution Inc.** in Rogue River, Oregon, said it is important for a broker to tell drivers beforehand how long they can expect to be at a dock, particularly given that the loading time for a nursery shipment can change dramatically depending on the type and size of the plants being loaded.

“We typically communicate with our shippers and the receivers to let them

know exactly what is being loaded on the trucks,” Frederick said. “We don't say, ‘Oh, it's nursery plants and so it will take four to six hours’ when we know it's going to take eight hours, because that will just cause more problems with us, with the truck and with the shippers.”

Also, Frederick noted, with some drivers, English is their second language, so explaining on site that a load is going to take several hours longer than anticipated can be difficult. “When that happens, sometimes it can get testy between the shippers and the trucks and the receivers and the trucks,” Frederick said.

Dale Parra, a freight broker with **Truck Transportation Services** (Wilsonville, Oregon), said he likes nurseries to overshoot when estimating the length of a loading process.

“Even if you know you're going to get him out of there in an hour-and-a-half, I would advise nurseries to tell the driver

it is going to be two hours,” Parra said. “That way if you get them out earlier, they're like, ‘Oh my gosh, that's great. They told me two hours and they got me out in an hour and a half.’”

In general, Parra said, the communication between nurseries and brokers has improved considerably in recent years, particularly as texting has become a more common. Parra said he has mobile numbers for shipping foremen, shipping coordinators and others at different nurseries and regularly texts them to keep them abreast of arrivals.

“I can just text the foreman, for example, and let him know such and such a truck is leaving St. Paul and will be at your place in an hour and ten minutes,” Parra said. “That gives them time to get their crew ready and it helps with their scheduling.”

Minimizing load times

Another key to ensuring effi-





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Getting the load on the road



When B&B plants are palletized for shipment, sometimes the wiring securing the burlap comes loose. Albelardo Hernandez tightens the wiring around a root ball at Bizon Nursery in preparation for shipping. PHOTO BY VIC PANICHKUL

ciency in shipping is to keep load times at a minimum, and for that, there is no replacement for an experienced crew, particularly given the variables involved in loading and shipping nursery product.

“It’s not like Costco or somebody like that where each pallet weighs the exact same,” Frederick said. “With nursery loads, all plants vary in weight and size, and it is not a ‘for-sure’ science as far as getting it out the door and loaded in a couple of hours.”

“Although many people attempt to handle nursery, it’s kind of a beast all of its own,” Mandel said. “You’re going to see long loading times. You’re going to see floor-loaded freight. It’s not palletized or on racks. It’s actually loaded piece-by-piece, and it’s loaded very carefully, which is very time consuming.

“Working with folks who know what they’re doing goes a long way,” Mandel added. “And a lot of that comes down to

training and experience.”

Nelson said Bountiful Farms has several crews dedicated to loading semis, and most have years of experience.

“We load pot-and-pot, containers from three gallons up to a 45 gallon and we load a lot of boxes, so we do a lot of collections. And so, it’s a definite jigsaw puzzle, and our crews are magicians when it comes to loading the truck,” Nelson said.

“We have seven bays and can load seven trucks at a time, and get them in and out in a timely manner,” Nelson added. “We know that these drivers aren’t making any money unless they’re driving, and we are very respectful of their money and their time.”

Keeping the same crew on a loading operation throughout the operation also can help a nursery avoid problems, Frederick said. And having an experienced shipping coordinator on the payroll is a big plus. “The shipping coordinators

for the nurseries are a big-time asset,” Frederick said. “They have a good understanding of what needs to get put on a truck. They know exactly how many plants they can get on during each time of year to make it scale.”

Respectful treatment

Another important facet of maintaining efficiency in nursery shipping, and one that is often overlooked, according to sources, is treating drivers with respect. Doing so can go a long way toward improving the experience for nurseries and shippers and can compel drivers to return to a nursery again and again.

From his days as a trucker, Gary “Bert” Bertelson of Integrity Logistics in Wilsonville, Oregon, still remembers the nurseries that treated him well, that greeted him with a smile, maybe brought out a bottle of water and gave him access to a breakroom. It’s those little things, he said,

that kept him coming back.

"I'd go back to them, and I'd bite my tongue, give them an extra hour or two before I said anything if they were running late," Bertelson said.

Nelson of Bountiful Farms said the relationship the nursery has with its drivers is an important part of his business model. "Ninety-nine percent of what we grow leaves our state, so having great relationships with the (freight) brokers and with the drivers themselves is critical to our business," Nelson said.

At Bountiful, drivers are welcome to relax in the break room, use vending machines, the microwave oven and to spend the night on site if they so desire, Nelson said.

"They are welcome to just come and park and stay overnight instead of having to go stay at a truck stop," Nelson said. "That way they can start fresh in the morning with the logbooks, and we'll have them up and loaded within a couple of hours."

Mandel said drivers notice and appreciate nurseries like Bountiful. "Having facilities for them to use, access to a break room or vending machines or microwaves can definitely make life easier for a driver," he said.

"And also having overnight parking is definitely one thing that is a huge help to the drivers," Mandel added. "Nationwide, there is a parking shortage for trucks, so when drivers can park overnight at a facility, that makes their lives easier."

"The more accommodations for drivers the better," Frederick said. "A lot of these nurseries are pretty remote. They don't have a Safeway across the street or a food cart."

Nelson added that Bountiful also recognizes that the driver who leaves his nursery with a load will be interacting with his customer on the other end. "If they have a pleasant experience at my nursery, it hopefully will be a little more enjoyable for them on the other end when they're backing into these small garden centers. We hope that if we start them off right, then it will end well also."



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Getting the load on the road

Trouble free

For the most part, despite the complexities built into shipping nursery product, the vast majority of shipments go off without a hitch. The ones that are troublesome, however, tend to be the most memorable in an industry that is all about getting product out the door and on the road as efficiently as possible.

"It's not the ones that are smooth that I remember as the much as the ones that we've got to bring back and scale," Frederick said in reference to reloading trucks that are found to be overweight on one of their axels. And, he said, sometimes a carrier leaves a nursery after truck weigh stations have closed for the night and will get well out of town before discovering a problem.

"Sometimes they can get down the road all the way to The Dalles or sometimes into Eastern Oregon before they have to get pulled back," Frederick said.



Inside Sales Manager Noah Fessler checks a shipment at one of the loading docks at Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKHUL

"And it's a big-time hassle when you've got to bring a truck back from Eastern Oregon and get recalibrated. And there is the crew too that has to take time out of their day to get that truck reloaded."

"It can cost thousands of dollars," he said. Fortunately, in a testament to the

efficiencies of Oregon nursery shippers, Frederick said that probably 90 percent of K&M's nursery loads are trouble-free. ©

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