

# Shifting seasons

Nurseries adjust perennial plant production cycles to save costs, meet market demand



At Van Belle Nursery, a wholesale grower in Abbotsford, B.C., Canada, the nursery essentially breaks down its production schedule into three units: one designed for early-spring sales, one for mid-spring, and one for late-spring sales. PHOTO COURTESY OF VAN BELLE NURSERY

BY MITCH LIES

Five years ago, **Everde Growers** — a wholesale nursery based in Texas but with farms in Forest Grove, Oregon, California, Texas and Florida — was starting 80% of its perennial production in the fall and 20% in late-winter, early-spring.

Today, according to Randy Nelson, general manager of Everde Growers' farm in Forest Grove, Oregon, that schedule has flip-flopped.

Conversely, Lorne Blackman of **Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc.**, a wholesale nursery on the Washington-Oregon border, has spread out his production lately by shifting some production from the spring to the fall to reduce labor costs.

"It's easier on labor and eases production bottlenecks," he said. "There is more risk with winter damage and that sort of thing, but if we can produce it in the fall instead of adding to our spring bottleneck

where we're already overwhelmed, it makes a lot of sense to do that."

Perennial plant production schedules at Northwest nurseries today run the gamut, starting anywhere from summer through early spring, as growers adjust to changes in labor laws, labor shortages, plant varietal advancements and market factors.

Many, like Grace Dinsdale, owner of wholesale grower **Blooming Nursery Inc.** in Cornelius, Oregon, have stayed with the more traditional fall production schedule. "We're not really changing the way we're doing it here," she said.

Others are finding advantages to a less traditional spring production, something that has become more feasible in recent years with the introduction of faster-growing hybrids and increased availability of vernalized plugs.

Everde Growers has turned to the spring for the bulk of its perennial plant production to help minimize overwinter-

ing losses and reduce plant care costs. The schedule has also helped defer plant production costs from the fall to winter months, Nelson said.

"If I can push off all those input costs, the container, the labor, the soil, everything that you're going to be putting up front in that September-October planting, until January, February or March and still start selling it in April, May and into June, then I can be using those funds for something else," Nelson said.

"Anytime you have a plant on the ground taking up square footage, there is a residency cost," Nelson added. "And you've got other costs going on for water, spraying, winter protection. So there is that added cost that you are saving, as well."

Nelson noted that the only plants Everde Growers is producing in the fall these days are those like peonies that need more establishment time.

"There is a handful that we do in >>

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Fall production eases the workload in the busy spring season, and because Van Belle's greenhouses are not overutilized in the fall, there is plenty of available space for plant production. And plant performance can sometimes be improved with fall production, said Director of Operations Pablo Costa. PHOTO COURTESY OF VAN BELLE NURSERY

the fall," he said, "but most of what we do now is in the spring." He added that he spaces perennials outdoors to acclimate them after spring production to help ensure plants are well adapted to environmental conditions.

### Winterization

At Blooming Nursery, Dinsdale prefers fall production in large part because she likes to winterize perennials before moving plants to the retail sector. Without that, she said, plants can go downhill when exposed to the elements. "They will kind of stall out a bit when the weather hits them, because they're not used to it," she said.

"Anything that comes right out of the greenhouse has to acclimate itself to the outdoor weather, and that's generally being done either in the box store or on the bench at a retail nursery or in somebody's garden. Whereas, when you have plants that are grown in the traditional way, that are grown under cool conditions

for a longer period, they don't go downhill when they first hit the market shelf," Dinsdale said. "They hold up and they continue growing. And then when you plant them, they don't go through that climate setback that plants that are grown in the greenhouse sometimes do."

Dinsdale added that Blooming Nursery "is heavy into production all the way from June through October," and has some spring production, specifically with newer hybrids that bloom in their first year. But even in those cases, she finishes plants outdoors.

"We do try to finish most everything up outside," she said. "We're not selling much out of the greenhouse. Usually it's getting moved out once it's rooting and then we finish it outside."

### Selling patterns

At the finished plants division of **Van Belle Nursery**, a wholesale grower in Abbotsford, B.C., Canada, changes in selling patterns have pushed the business more

into fall production in recent years, according to Pablo Costa, director of operations and growing for the Canadian nursery.

"Through the years, we've been shipping earlier and earlier in the season," Costa said.

The nursery essentially breaks down its production schedule into three units, Costa said, one designed for early-spring sales, one for mid-spring, and one for late-spring sales. "And then I have summer perennials," he added.

Costa said he will start moving plugs into two-gallon pots in the fall and continue doing so into January and February for later-season sales. In the past, he noted, the nursery started most of its production in the winter.

Fall production, he said, eases the workload in the busy spring season, and because the nursery's greenhouses are not overutilized in the fall, there is plenty of available space for plant production. And plant performance can sometimes be improved with fall production, he said.



Walla Walla Nursery Co. Inc., a wholesale nursery on the Washington-Oregon border, has spread out its production lately by shifting some production from the spring to the fall to reduce labor costs. There's more risk with winter damage but if the nursery can produce it in the fall, it alleviates some of the spring bottleneck. PHOTO COURTESY OF WALLA WALLA NURSERY CO. INC.

“We have the space in the greenhouse where I can hold my perennials, winterize them basically, and I develop a better, more established plant,” he said.

The cost difference between the fall and spring production schedules are relatively minor, Costa said, in part because he minimizes heating costs by only heating greenhouses when temperatures dip below freezing.

Costa said the nursery now is exploring the potential to offer sales of all-season perennials in the fall.

### The labor effect

At Walla Walla Nursery, Blackman said that he has shifted away from producing in the busy spring season in large part to reduce overtime labor costs, a goal that increased in importance after Washington's ag overtime law reached the 40-hour threshold in 2024. “The more production we move into the spring, the more overtime we have to pay,” Blackman said.

He added that today he is producing nearly year-round, other than a break in November and December, and that

February, March, April and August are his heaviest potting months.

In addition to minimizing the overtime he is paying, by spreading out production and doing more of it in the fall, Blackman said he can capture more value out of his container lots. “We've got all this space in the late summer and fall, so my feeling is, let's use it to capture all that energy. I kind of look at container lots as giant solar panels, and the fuller they are, the more value we're producing, the more value we are capturing from the sun.”

Also, Blackman said, in some cases, fall production can help produce a better-quality plant. “It's a mix,” he said. “A fresh-potted plant grown in the spring from a nice liner that may be vernalized can yield a very nice plant, but there is definitely quality improvements for some of the more hardy plants, such as creeping *Phlox* or hardy *Dianthus*, that require vernalization.

“For creeping *Phlox*, it takes a little time to build a full crown,” he added. “That isn't the case so much with the *Dianthus*, but you do get a better plant with fall production.”

All that said, Blackman acknowledged that there are some drawbacks to late-summer and fall production, including more plant loss to winter conditions and the need to send out crews to cover plants when a freeze hits.

“I always hope it will be a mild winter, and we won't have to bring out the sandbags and the fabric,” he said.

Invariably a freeze hits, he said, and he needs to send out his crew. Still, the crew can cover the whole nursery in two days.

“So, there is actually very little cost if you spread it out on a per unit basis,” he said. And, he said, with most of his production destined for colder, inland mountain regions where tender greenhouse-grown material will be set back by spring frosts, overwintering plants can be a key production step. ☺

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