



‘Musings from the Top of the Compost Heap’

No. 2

18April2020

Greetings!

A few musings from the past couple of weeks....

I hope everyone is safe and healthy! As growers, we are used to early springs, no rain, too much rain, Lygus Bugs and so on, but we have never been confronted with the challenges we are facing this year. The big question is how we plan for this season. I think the responsible answer is we cover as many bases as possible! I have no answers for this summer, but I have some things for us to think about.



Festiva Maxima emerging early; here on May 10, 2019.

Last year at this time we had no snow. On April 07, 2019 our high temperature was 53 degrees (in Fairbanks) and on April 30 it was 67 degrees. Our plants started emerging at the end of the first week of May, the image shows some Festiva Maxima on May 10, 2019. This led to an extremely early season for us; we overlapped with late [and stored] Dutch flowers and harvested ahead of some areas of Minnesota and New England. We didn't have our "window" of flower availability we typically count on.

This year our snow is rapidly melting—we're down to about two feet of coverage (!), but nighttime temperatures are forecasted to be in the 20's and low 30's through at least May 1. We might not have a 'late' year, but it looks like we won't be early!! Reports out of Europe have the Dutch cutting a couple weeks earlier than their typical start time this year. The East Coast of the US and the upper tier Mid-west states all are forecasted to

be in the 60's through the end of April—more southern states such as Virginia and South Carolina might harvest before Mother's Day. Bottom-line, we should be alone in our July/August harvest window this year. We are in better shape than last year! This is important because we have a number of challenges to overcome already and having an early season would have really complicated things!

In a nutshell, we have two major challenges in forecasting this season.

- 1) Our wholesalers are still largely shut down—cut flowers have not been 'essential' businesses in many states. Additionally, there have been no events, weddings, conventions, etc. so wholesalers literally have had nowhere to sell flowers even if they had them. Mass market (grocery) has been similarly impacted, but for different reasons. The floral departments were scaled back or closed to reassign floral personnel to drive-thru services or shelf restocking.
- 2) Floral transportation companies have scaled back or stopped delivery services—particularly out of California. FedEx appears to have maintained service, but my understanding is prices are much higher and sheer volume has made delivery dates/times somewhat 'soft'. Also, commercial air service to and from Alaska has been scaled way back.

In all this, growers that have flowers found that there has been an unexpectedly strong demand. This is where Alaskan peonies come in...

If markets start opening up in the next 6 weeks, we will be in a potentially enviable position of having beautiful, fresh flowers when supplies are potentially very limited—for all flowers, not just peonies. If states and businesses open up wisely, without a second wave of infection, we harvest as normal. Many of the weddings and other events might be rescheduled for fall creating even greater demand. The challenge in this scenario is that many of our wholesalers will just be getting back on their feet and might not be up to speed yet by mid-summer. If flower clients, who formerly purchased from their wholesaler, now buy direct from the grower it dramatically changes the number and size of boxes we might need. Also, we would send a lot more boxes via FedEx which dramatically increases our exposure to vagrancies in their delivery service that we have experienced in recent years. All potentially at a higher price. Additionally, more direct buyers might create an 'overabundance of riches' for some farms. Consequently, all farms need to be very diligent in all their quality control procedures, so if called upon to fill orders by other member farms, we don't embarrass ourselves and them with poor quality stems. Plan now for your plant care—it is too late a week before harvest!

If harvest occurs as planned this summer, a major hurdle might not be flower related, but transportation related. The tourist industry is pretty much a no-go this summer; aside from the obvious economic impacts—we won't have the volume of planes we typically expect to haul flowers south. I have sent an inquiry to Alaska Air Cargo hoping to get a rough idea of what volume they might be able to handle under different scenarios this summer. We are also looking into the feasibility/possibility of trucking

flowers south. If we are able to aggregate truckloads; there are a million details that have to be resolved. The most important from the grower's perspective is flowers have to be cut tight, refrigerated immediately, and held at the appropriate temperature AND diligent, proper anti-fungal treatments followed prior to, during harvest-time and in storage—we cannot afford a single grower to infect a large load!

If markets don't open up, or we have a second wave of Covid19 infection, we might have to consider not harvesting at all this summer. It is a terrible option (particularly after the challenges of last summer). However, it makes no sense to cut stems (negatively impacting the plants); spending money on harvesting and storage--only to compost the stems. This is not what anyone wants, but the reality we face is we might have to make the decision to not harvest.

I will be sending out as much information as I can find going forward this summer. I have asked our Regional Reps to contact all of you to open a line of communication, so we can smoothly disseminate information; respond to questions; and give whatever help possible in getting us through this summer in the best possible position.

Currently, we have more questions than answers -- things are literally changing daily, but we must prepare in advance to be able to respond appropriately when we need to act.

We are all in this together!! Being flower farmers is a challenge, but I believe that we all farm because we enjoy, and can handle challenges. This year will be a challenge no matter which way 2020 goes!!

Please be safe; stay healthy and keep in touch with your regional representatives!

Cheers

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