

Born In The USA

Combining our Top Liner Growers and Top Plug Growers into one ranking has shown that young plant growers have similar challenges and a fighting spirit that won't quit.

by **LAURA DROTLEFF**
 Managing Editor
 ldrotleff@meistermedia.com

CHANGE is what continues to keep the young plant industry fresh. And in the past 10 years, it has seen its fair share with a serious increase not only in competition, but also in expecta-

tions, prices, efficiency and innovation. Yet despite the growth in this sector, young plant growers are finding they need to work harder to make the same kind of cash that was coming in hand over fist just 10 years ago.

This year, instead of ranking our top plant growers separately based on whether they grow plugs or liners, we have combined the rankings to include

growers of all types of young plants. We made the switch because so many of the top growers were specializing in both plugs and liners, and our previous rankings didn't allow us to include those specializing in tissue culture or other types of young plants.

For the first year combining the rankings, we had a decent response. Of 2,476 surveys distributed, 76 grow-

ers participated for a 3 percent response rate. As a first effort combining all young plant growers, our ranking is very comprehensive, yet a number of growers that have participated in past years declined to do so this year, thus a few estimates had to be made.

Our list includes a wide range of grower sizes, and a large number of others came close to the cutoff. Some shuffling among the large players occurred, but overall there hasn't been a lot of change in terms of young plant producers' numbers. One change we did make in the rankings was to list the Web sites of those who have real-time availability and ordering capabilities, which has become more and more prevalent and important as the marketplace has increased in competition (see "Got Real-Time?" page 15).

Growing Markets

The specialty annuals boom continues to make an impact on the seed business, with the major-

Top 25 Young Plant Growers

| Grower | 2004 Quantity* Produced | HQ | Years In Production | Web Site with Real-time Inventory |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|----|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Tagawa Greenhouses | 500 million* | CO | 38 | N/A |
| 2. Green Circle Growers | 450 million* | OH | 37 | www.greencirclehome.com |
| 3. JP Bartlett | 300-370 million | MA | 50+ | www.bartlettgreenhouses.com |
| 4. Speedling | 300 million | FL | 37 | www.speedling.com |
| 5. Plug Connection | 255 million | CA | 17 | www.plugconnection.com |
| 6. C. Raker & Sons | 170-180 million | MI | 28 | www.raker.com |
| 7. Plainview Growers | 160 million | NJ | 16 | www.plainviewgrowers.com |
| 8. Floral Plant Growers | 156 million* | WI | 20 | N/A |
| 9t. Knox Nursery | 150 million* | FL | 43 | www.knoxnursery.com |
| 9t. Wagner Greenhouses | 150 million* | MN | N/A | www.wagners.biz |
| 11. Cal Seedling | 140 million | CA | 12 | N/A |
| 12. Kube-Pak Corp. | 137 million* | NJ | 33 | www.kubepak.com |
| 13. Van de Wetering Ghses. | 120 million | NY | 16 | www.vdwgreenhouses.com |
| 14. GroLink | 110 million | CA | 20 | www.grolink.com |
| 15. Bob's Mkt & Ghses. | 98 million | WV | 21 | N/A |
| 16. Yoder Brothers | 80-90 million* | OH | 84 | www.yoder.com |
| 17. EuroAmerican Propagators | 53 million* | CA | 12 | www.euroamprop.com |
| 18t. Van Wingerden Ghses. | 50 million | WA | 25 | N/A |
| 18t. Glass Corner Ghses. | 50 million | MI | 25 | www.glasscorner.com |
| 20. Pat Ford Nursery | 40-45 million | FL | 10 | N/A |
| 21. Four Star Greenhouse | 41 million* | MI | N/A | www.fourstargh.com |
| 22. Oglevee Ltd. | 31 million | PA | 40 | www.oglevee.com |
| 23. ForemostCo. | 25-30 million* | FL | 12 | www.foremostco.com |
| 24. Northwest Horticulture | 26 million | WA | 6 | www.northwesthort.com |
| 25t. Superfresh | 25 million | OH | 10 | Under construction |
| 25t. Milestone Agriculture | 25 million | FL | 18 | www.milestoneag.com |
| 25t. Twyford International | 25 million | FL | 20 | www.twyford.com |

*Estimate

N/A = not available

ity of our growers producing vegetative varieties. However many agree a resurgence in innovative seed varieties is beginning to turn the tides. "We are continually evolving into vegetative genetics, although we feel that the front edge of the paradigm swinging the other direction may be occurring," said Mike Gooder of Plantpeddler.

Inspired by recent seed introductions

by PanAmerican Seed, Green Tech's Owais Khan said he is confident the seed market is turning around. "For the last several years, cuttings have been up and seeds down, but I think seed use will go back up as specialty annuals from seed become more prevalent, i.e. the new diascias, nemesias and angelonias from seed," he said.

Other strong business gains have

occurred in vegetative perennials, larger container plantings, niche market potted plants, larger liner sizes and prefinished plants and direct unrooted sales, according to our respondents. Declines have largely been in annuals in packs, common annuals like geraniums and impatiens and "old-fashioned products."

Grower Challenges

Shipping was one of the most challenging areas for many growers, especially with the current cost of gas and diesel at sky-high rates. The majority said they use several means of transportation for their young plants shipments, including sending boxes via common carriers like FedEx, UPS and DHL, as well as using Air Freight and shipping racks on their own company trucks.

A few growers have incorporated new innovations to solve shipping problems. Progressive Perennials uses one-way racks; Plainview still uses its cardboard, one-way shipping tower. Plantpeddler has created a patented Strip-Eze program that locks product into the shipping unit, ensuring safe delivery of liners shipped long distance. "This allows us to typically ship at double or more normal case densities," Gooder said.

The large majority of our respondents mentioned fuel costs as their number one challenge. While many growers seemed overwhelmed by soaring costs, others are hopeful and have come up with ways to run their businesses more efficiently. Whether by spending a great deal of time and effort looking for the best value and price, or by running greenhouses cooler and shutting down others for whole seasons, enterprising young plant growers aren't giving up.

Bob's Market and Greenhouses is adding surcharges on freight and increasing prices to defray fuel costs. Wessel/Wesplug is allowing lower minimums on items and offsetting that by slightly raising freight prices. Sawyer Nursery is trying to send more young plants on brokered trucks and using styrofoam-wrapped racks in winter when using shipping services like FedEx. Speedling solves the

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Got Real-Time?

Of the 76 who responded, 44 said they have an Internet presence for their respective businesses, while 18 do not. Company information, live inventory availabilities and online ordering capabilities were common among the young plant growers that have Web sites. Cultural information and variety photo galleries were also prevalent, as were scheduling and delivery information. Several respondents said their Web sites were currently under construction or anticipating the addition of new technologies.

Real-time is a term that will continue to gain importance in the live inputs sector, as many of our Top 25 have realized the value of this technology and the convenience it offers not only to grower customers but also to their business-to-business broker relationships.

freight cost issue by constantly renegotiating with suppliers and collaborating on finding alternative solutions.

Finding Solutions

With increased competition comes increased services to close the gap. Many of our top growers are using delivery services to promote more value to their customers. "We are extending our grower truck delivery region," said Karin Gravagna of Van de Wetering. "Also, our turnaround time has greatly increased from time an order has been placed off of our availability lists to the time the order is delivered via grower truck."

As growers become busier, guaranteed fast turnarounds and deliveries are invaluable when time is of the essence. Park Avenue Farms offers unrooted cuttings that are cut, shipped and at the customer's door within 24 hours or less. Welby delivers regionally on its own trucks to defray shipping costs and get orders to customers faster. Partial orders at no charge is a service Van Wingerden Greenhouses offers.

Among other special services are provision of larger plug and liner

sizes, as well as crop planning and expert technical advice. Malmberg's sells in strips of 25 plants so smaller growers can still have a good variety of plants. Several growers also have expanded their variety lists and plug and liner sizes, striving to become a more convenient, one-stop shop.

Despite the seemingly endless challenges, 12 young plant growers are ex-

panding their businesses with new facilities and eight are implementing more automation equipment to run more efficiently with less labor.

To sum up, Hans Gerritsen of Hortus Group put it best when he answered our query of what it takes to be successful in the young plants industry. The secret to his success: "Good health and a bad memory." **GG**

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