

Features

12/30/2013

Replacing “Typhoid Mary”

Jennifer Polanz

Back in our November issue of *GrowerTalks/Green Profit*, my colleague Jennifer Zurko went in-depth on the disease Impatiens Downy Mildew (IDM) and the effect it had on the industry last year. In case you missed it, you can find digital back issues of the magazine on our website, www.growertalks.com.

So where do we go from here? It's impossible to predict what will happen with IDM this year, since there are many factors involved in where it appears and why. For instance, weather plays a huge role, with drought delaying its appearance in many locations until the rain begins. Though researchers are still trying to pinpoint exactly how the spread works, they know it can spread through soil, water and air, making it difficult to impossible to combat once identified on the bench (for more on the research, see Dr. Colleen Warfield's story this month “Will Your Impatiens be Smokin' in 2014?” on the GrowerTalks side).

Though growers and retailers are not required to report IDM, Colleen was able to track the disease either in greenhouse, landscape or both in 39 states (40 if you count Washington, D.C.) as of October 2013. That's more states than the previous year. Her advice for replacing impatiens at the retail level? “I would encourage retailers to display photos of the alternative crops in full bloom,” she says. “So many of the alternative shade crops (like begonias and New Guinea impatiens) don't have much color at the time of sale and I think it is difficult for consumers to envision how the plant is ever going to live up to their expectations.”

It's a difficult decision to make—do you take the risk and sell impatiens knowing the potential for infection? Or dump what in many cases is the best-selling plant you have? We found two retailers who have already taken the leap in dumping “Typhoid Mary” and replacing it successfully (and profitably) with a variety of shade plants. How did they do it? Read on.

STEP 1: Have A Go-To Expert

Valley View Farms in Cockeysville, Maryland, had its a-ha moment in late spring 2012. They had heard about the problem the summer before via trade magazines and trade shows, and knew to be on the lookout for it.

“We had an early breakout in May/June of 2012,” recalls Carrie Engel, retail greenhouse manager. “We immediately pulled suspicious plants and sent them to Karen Rane at the University of Maryland Plant Pathology lab. She confirmed our on-the-go diagnoses and we stopped selling impatiens immediately. Anyone who came back with reports of IDM was refunded the cost of their plants or received substitutions—

primarily begonias and vinca.”

For Jennifer Brennan, horticulture information specialist at Chalet Nursery in Wilmette, Illinois, the samples of IDM came through the Chalet diagnostic center during spring and summer 2012.

“My eyes were opened up by Dr. Margery Daughtrey (senior extension associate at the Long Island Horticulture Research & Extension Center) when I had a discussion with her at the Perennial Plant Association Symposium in Boston that summer,” she adds. “That was when I realized that major decisions needed to be made about using *Impatiens walleriana* in the landscape.”

She confirmed her fears with Dr. Colleen Warfield, corporate plant pathologist at Ball Horticultural Company. In both instances—with Valley View and Chalet—they sought out the advice of an expert before making their decision. It’s a wise move. Experts can be found at local universities, in the extension department or at industry companies who are continually researching the problem. Find an expert you trust and confer with them about your situation.

STEP 2: Make the Decision

The management at both Valley View and Chalet made the decision not to sell impatiens for the 2013 season. Was it an easy choice? No. For Valley View, impatiens totaled \$250,000 of sales in 2012, while they were a \$75,000 business at Chalet. In an already difficult period for independent garden centers, it was a tough choice indeed.

“What shocked us was all the retail operations that continued to sell *Impatiens walleriana*,” Jennifer notes. “All the IGCs and the big box stores were still selling them cheap, and people did buy them because they thought they were getting a good deal. One of the boxes told people to change your soil.”

After significant talks with other growers, meetings at OFA, and calls to Penn State and Ball Horticultural Company, Valley View’s owners decided in fall of 2012 not to offer impatiens the following season. In both cases, the decision was made early on and allowed enough time to plan for replacements and to get educational efforts in place to negate the sales impact.

STEP 3: Educate the Staff

Before customers even enter the doors, the staff has to be on board with the new shade offerings and how to talk about IDM and why there are no impatiens on the benches. Carrie at Valley View says Marvin Miller, market research manager at Ball, talked early on about creating drama in the garden using caladiums and other shade plants.

“This became a key marketing phrase for us,” she says. “We trained all of our greenhouse staff in several key meetings, met with many garden clubs throughout our region, offered in-house seminars in February and March to our customers and contacted area garden writers to help us talk about alternatives.”

Prior to 2013, the staff had been trained on what had been the impatiens aisles at the store for more than 30 years. But last spring, when a customer approached, the staff spoke to them about alternatives, complete with handouts, signs and an idea book with photos of other shade-loving plants.

For Chalet, staff education came through the company's Chalet College, an off-season training program where information from several sources was presented. Then, the information was followed up by show-and-tell sessions involving the Chalet diagnostics program when infected material would come in from customers. It was continued in the 15-minute huddles that occur before the store opens each morning.

"That's when IDM was brought up regularly so everyone knew what was going on," Jennifer says.

STEP 4: Educate Customers

Once the staff knows what to say and how to present the alternatives, it's time to retrain the customers. And that, sometimes, is the hardest job of all.

"We ran into die-hard customers who were just going to plant them anyway," Jennifer says. "We said, 'Okay, but you're planting 'Typhoid Mary.'"

Chalet Retail Manager Tony Fulmer did a live demonstration about IDM on WGN, and Jennifer appeared on the local ABC affiliate to continue the message. They spoke in the Education Center at Chalet, as well as at the Chicago Flower & Garden Show and to area garden clubs about the problem. They worked with the local newspaper, the Wilmette Beacon, on a story called "What's Happened to the Impatiens?" Jennifer also worked the social media angle, continuing the discussion on Facebook.

In-store, they posted signs in the areas where the impatiens benches used to be and printed up double-sided color sheets with shade alternatives. For Chalet, Jennifer says the print news story, TV appearances and the double-sided color handout were the most effective at getting the word out in their area.

At Valley View, Carrie and others worked with the local media, as well, and received coverage of the issue on their network-affiliated stations, along with radio and articles in the Baltimore Sun ("Impatiens for the Garden Face Growing Threat," and the Wall Street Journal ("Impatiens are Withering, And Some Say It's About Time").

"We became the go-to source for information about IDM here in our region," Carrie adds. "Our staff was more engaged with customers than ever before; it was a great opportunity for us and our customers."

So besides working with local media, pushing the social media angle and educating through your own email newsletters, an in-store push is also necessary. A printed sheet with descriptions of shade-lovers is a great way to get the information into your customers' hands. A copy should be on your website for printing, too.

STEP 5: Make Money

So how did they successfully complete the shade plant switch? Valley View increased begonia and New Guinea impatiens production across the board, and dedicated more space to larger displays of shade-loving material. "We did have a grower of mixed combos, and asked her to make sure there were no impatiens in the mixes," Carrie says. "She complied, even though she was shipping mixed combos with impatiens to other area growers.

“We also looked hard at our retail prices and did increase our 4.5-in. premium annual line and our 3-in. vegetable line to offset.”

All told, plant sales at Valley View, which include annuals, perennials, vegetables and herbs, were up 3% in 2013. “While not huge, the fact that impatiens sales accounted for \$250,000 in 2012, coupled with the fact that dollar sales were up at all this year, had us all sighing with relief,” Carrie adds.

At Chalet, the annuals buyer negotiated with growers to get them to grow New Guinea impatiens in 6-packs and almost like flats. “It gave them the same feeling as regular impatiens,” Jennifer says. “We priced them so the dollars would even out.”

She adds customers also were surprised by the amount of shade offerings, and weren’t aware many could grow in the shade. “It gave them a fresh look,” she says. “They’d come back and tell me ‘I’m having so much fun doing these different types of plants and having a fresh look.’ We got some great feedback.”

Looking To Spring 2014

No one knows what will happen this year, but until breeders come up with IDM-resistant impatiens, it’s a good bet we’ll see it in a variety of states in the coming years. The two retailers profiled here are happy they made the decision for their operations, and will continue to stay *Impatiens walleriana*-free until new developments in prevention or breeding.

“I’m proud we did our part in getting the message out. We do talk about it [carrying impatiens again],” Jennifer says, adding it won’t happen until something changes. “I’ve been in this business for 35 years, and this is the worst thing I’ve seen since Emerald Ash Borer to happen in horticulture.”

Carrie says she hopes other retailers will follow suit for 2014: “I would suggest that other garden centers look at the tremendous availability of other shade annuals, tropical and perennials, and help staff and consumers see that they can do something different and create their own drama instead of planting impatiens again.” **GP**

Landscape Update

The reality is that most commercial landscapers have already moved on. Few have not heard about the disease at this point. Most have stopped using *Impatiens walleriana*, or have moved to sparing use, and some use only in pots. Some have observed lower incidence in pots. While this appears to be the case, it is more likely due to the fact that infection is simply not as prolific. Improved airflow and soilless mixes in pots are positive contributors. The plants can still get IDM if it’s present in the environment. Because the landscape trade used less *Impatiens walleriana*, the occurrence of disease was lower, and happened later. Most landscape growers now know to do fungicide preventative treatments, and have cut way back. Begonias, coleus and New Guineas—specifically Divine and *Sunpatiens interspecific*—have begun being used in higher proportions.

— Jeff Gibson, Landscape Business Manager at Ball Horticultural Company