

Features

7/1/2021

What's the Deal With Foliage Plant Availability?

Ellen C. Wells

In recent *Tropical Topics* enewsletter sends, I included questions and answers that had gone unaddressed during AmericanHort's April 6 webinar "Trends & Availability for Tropical and Foliage Plants." The initial event featured guest experts Kingston White of Morning Dew Tropicals, Maxwell Mercer of Mercer Botanicals, Denise Godfrey of Olive Hill Greenhouses Inc., and Bryan Johnston of Tri-State Foliage. We just couldn't get to all the questions being asked—seriously strong attendee participation!

Kingston and Maxwell offered up additional answers to questions we didn't get to during the webinar. Here they are, beginning with a question that was asked (in different ways) several times:

Q: *Have you thought about prioritizing selling to customers that you've been working with for a few years and turning away new customers? It's been a struggle as a plant shop for six years now. I buy year-round. I'm having a hard time [with] garden centers and everyone jumping on the band wagon.*

Kingston: "I'm not sure if I can say 'all'—'most' or 'many' growers do this. Reputable growers that are looking to build long-term relationships will ALL do this: prioritize selling to customers who have a history. New customers are being turned away by most growers I speak to."

Maxwell: "We prioritize our customers and availability for them based off a few things: frequency of buying, consistency (year-round including summer), purchasing of our full product line, loyalty (are we being 'cherry-picked') and stays within our payment terms. We currently do not feel right adding on new customers when we are shorting our current customers so much. This is a great opportunity, though, for new people to get their foot in the door and start a conversation with new vendors. Do not go in with the expectation of getting product now, but with the expectation of [getting product] in the future. Now is the time to be building relationships with new growers."

Pre-Books

Q: *How far in advanced should the pre-books be placed?*

Kingston: "Depends on your source for plants. Talk to your growers/broker and find out what they require (or allow—many growers are not taking pre-books because things are changing so quickly)."

Maxwell: "We are currently not taking pre-books and typically have not in the past. I recommend you communicate with your suppliers and see if they are taking pre-books and what timeline they need (my guess is four to six months in advance)."

Hoarding and Waiting

Q: *Do you find that some garden centers are hoarding plant material? Availabilities seem to disappear in minutes after publishing.*

Kingston: “That could be the case for certain items, but I can’t say for sure. For high-demand material, growers will typically divvy it out where they can spread the availability to as many of their long-term customers as possible.”

Maxwell: “I do think some garden centers are getting what they can, when they can. If they have the space to hold extra material, they will. Some garden centers I know do not have that luxury, so they are needing more consistency in availability from growers, which is extremely tough right now. If you could work on having some sort of holding for extra material it may pay off for you in the loss of ‘sales floor’ you would have to devote to that storage.”

Size Availability

Q: *There seems to be almost no availability for 6-in. and 8-in. staples, and very few 10-in. How long do we anticipate this? Are there any things we can do to actually get material like Pothos?*

Maxwell: “Pothos and other vining material is a lot of work for the growers. We maintain our own stock on all of these materials, which means we must take care of the stock daily, cut the vines when ready, cut up the eyes and stick 12-plus cuttings per pot. It is extremely labor intensive over everything else we grow and we have the largest portion of our staff dedicated to these products. For this reason I know a number of growers that have gotten out of these types of products. The best thing you can do is to communicate with your suppliers and ask them what timeframes they are looking at for the specific products you are looking for. Ask them to keep you in mind when they find out those products do become available.”

Kingston: “Growers have limited space and produce as much as they can as quickly as they can. Like Maxwell said, let your supplier know to keep you in mind when those products are available and check back often.”

Q: *Given continued increased demand this spring and limited supply due to all the factors, do you foresee less 10-in.-plus pot sizes available in 2021 and more 2-in. and 4-in. pot sizes being available until things even out?*

Maxwell: “I think you will still see 10-in. product around. There are certain growers that have always done those larger sizes and will not change. Us personally, we have gotten away from the 2-in. to 3-in. market and only focus on the 4-in to 8-in. Cuttings and tissue culture prices are increasing, so those products typically do not go into 4-in. because customers won’t pay the price point. As labor cost increases in California and now Florida, I believe you will see less of the smaller pot sizes and more of the larger material because it requires less labor.”

Contract Growing

Q: *We are thinking about having some of the 4-in. plants we need consistently contract grown. Do you think that would be possible?*

Kingston: “Contract growing is possible depending on the relationship you have with the growers/broker you buy from, but I find a lot of growers shy away from it (for good reason, explained below). A few things to keep in mind for contract growing: timing is very difficult to match up. The grower has to ship the plants when they’re ready, but Mother Nature dictates the timing. Often, when the plants are ready will not match when you actually planned to take the product. If construction is involved for where the plants will be installed/used, timing is nearly impossible—construction delays always happen. Also, factor in that the grower is planting pots specific for you, it leaves less flexibility to account for any that go bad or if there is an entire crop failure. Growers hate to let customers down and take great pride in the plants they grow. Because of the risks involved, during normal times, growers are more open to doing pre-books (advice: be sure to take everything you pre-booked). One last thing to keep in mind, contract

growing doesn't lend itself to a volume discount and can often be more work for the grower."

Tropicals Media

Q: *Do you have any general tips on selecting potting media for replanting tropicals?*

Kingston: "This is a pretty robust topic as each plant has its own mix and every grower has their own mix. Typically, tropicals use a mix made up of peat, pine bark, perlite and fertilizer. Some use coir and some plants use sand (sand for plants that need really good drainage)."

Maxwell: "It is entirely plant specific. We generally use 50% peat, 10% wood fiber and 40% green bark. Sometimes we modify that ratio for the plants that need better drainage. That doesn't mean it is the Gold Standard—it is just what has worked for us over the years. It really depends on how heavy of a waterer you are. If you tend to water more then you may want a soil that is more forgiving and have more items that would help with drainage."

Interiorscaping

Q: *As an end-user interiorscape sales rep working with a local plant broker, how can I get growers' availability so I can spec plants that ARE available?*

Kingston: "Having a grower's availability may not help. Even something on the list with specs listed may be gone by the time the customer gets approval for the service and your company goes to place the order. (I'm making a few assumptions here). Many growers have online availability lists. The Morning Dew availability list is updated daily with up-to-date interiorscape-quality plants. There are people that can help on the 'interiorscape.com' Facebook group who may have good advice on sales tactics." **GP**

Watch the Webinar

In case you missed it, the archived version of AmericanHort's webinar "Trends & Availability for Tropical and Foliage Plants" can be found under the Knowledge Center link at [AmericanHort.org](https://www.americanhort.org).



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