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H

SHIPSHAPE



Growers tell how to get healthy plugs to customers' doorsteps.

by JEAN AYLSWORTH

PRODUCING quality plugs for sale to other growers is just half the battle. Getting them to those growers on time and in good condition is the other half.

Over the last 10 years, plug growers have learned that proper preparation for shipment, packaging, and choosing the right means of transportation can make major differences in customer satisfaction.

We spoke with several major plug growing operations for tips on successful shipment.

Cost is Key

"There is no question that transportation costs and service are of concern to plug growers," says Dr. Louis Berninger, of Speedling, Inc., Sun City, FL. "We have to explore all options and find just the right mix. Sometimes you follow the lead of others and sometimes you have to go your own way depending on your situation and your particular product."

He says that shipping by Federal Express has become almost standard for major plug growers — both because of the door-to-door service and the ease of tracking orders.

"Most of our orders go by Federal Express," he says. "The product is taken directly to the customer's greenhouse without any intermediate stops, so we feel we have more control over delivery. And the two-day period it may take is well within the shelflife of the product."

"Also, since the order is in the hands of the carrier from the time it leaves here until it's delivered, it is easy to trace. If a customer calls in and says an order hasn't been received, we can find out where it is and report a delivery time."

While cost is definitely a consideration, Berninger says that if it's calculated on a per plug basis,

Federal Express charges amount to just a fraction of a penny each.

"If you were to look solely at the cost for shipping 100 pounds, you might say it's a lot of money, but if you figure it on a per-unit basis and compare it with sending the order by air and either having the grower pick it up at the airport or paying another company to transport it to the greenhouse, you will find there is hardly any difference in cost."

Although Berninger is generally satisfied with the service and handling provided by Federal Express, his company is starting to use another more cost-effective method for shipping some very large orders.

"We have identified some areas of the country

"Transportation costs and service are of concern to plug growers," says Dr. Louis Berninger of Speedling, Inc.



where we have enough volume of business that we are trucking directly from here to that location," he says. "The trucking cost is much less expensive. But we can only do that because we have enough volume to justify it."

Berninger says an order can be trucked from Florida to Minneapolis, for example, in two days.

"We have to work around some big consumers in a tight area to make it worthwhile," he says. "Sometimes one greenhouse operation may serve as a distribution point for several growers."

"This type of shipping may not ever dominate the business, but it's an option for selected customers."

Speedling plugs are packed in standard corrugated boxes with an inner locking system that prevents the flats from moving around. Ensuring proper moisture during shipment and protection from heat and cold are primary concerns.

Once an order is delivered, Berninger recommends that the box be opened as quickly as possible. The plugs should be kept out of direct sunlight in a cool location. The moisture should be checked immediately.

"Ideally, they should be planted the following day," Berninger says. "The longer they are held, the more difficult it is to maintain quality."

"All our shipments are sent in insulated boxes on a year-round basis," says David Eastburn, of Gro 'n Sell, Chalfont, PA. "Depending on weather and distance, they are shipped by United Parcel Service (UPS) or Federal Express."

Eastburn uses UPS for ground shipments within 400 miles. His one complaint with that carrier is that it doesn't have a tracing system.

"With Federal Express, we have our own terminal and we can trace our packages," he says. "That works out well for us both for finding orders and for providing proof of delivery."

He says that because of the extra service involved, he believes the cost of shipping by Federal Express is well worth it.

"It's convenient for us and for our customers because service is door-to-door," he says. "It alleviates the hassle of having orders picked up at the



airport. The few dollars extra that it may cost over air freight is still less than it would cost to send somebody to the airport."

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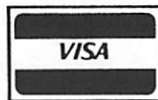
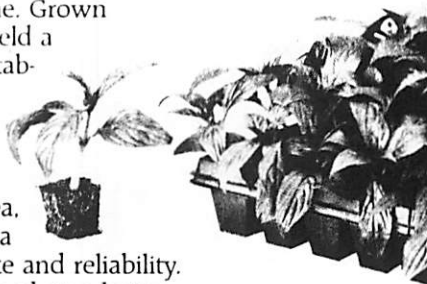
Gro 'n Sell's insulated boxes protect shipments from heat and cold, so regardless of the carrier, orders generally arrive in good condition.

"Heat is more of a concern," Eastburn says. "We have very rare instances where we have problems with cold damage. There is a little bit of extra cost involved for the insulation, but no more than a dollar or two to save \$100 worth of merchandise."

Eastburn recommends that his customers unpack

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the plugs and allow them to acclimate for one to two days before transplanting. The plugs should be watered two to three times a day depending on the time of the year.

Eastburn says that in the 10 years he's been in the plug business he has learned many things by trial and error.

"A lot of things that are generally accepted knowledge now took us four to five years to find out," he says. "It took us several years to experiment and learn."

Eastburn is putting that body of knowledge about plug production to work for him in the construction of a new 20,000 square foot American-

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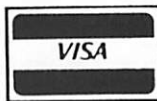
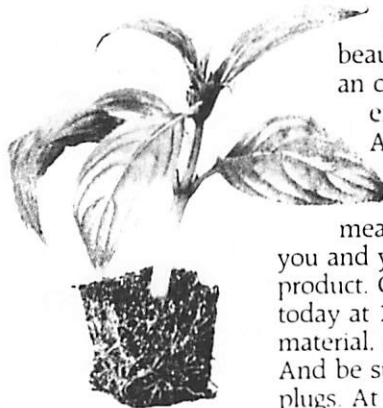
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made aluminum and glass range that will be used strictly for plugs.

"We wanted to start from scratch with an entirely new operation," he says. "We are working with several researchers and will incorporate all the latest plug technology."

Plans call for the new facility to be up and running sometime later this fall.

Lowell Boring, of Country Acres, Marysville, OH, says plug orders are pulled over the weekend for shipment Monday through Wednesday.

"We like to ship as early in the week as possible," he says. "We don't ship after Wednesday because an order could get held up and sit in the airport over the weekend — and we can't have that. It happened to us once and it was a total disaster."

Since the plug is a perishable product grown in a small volume of medium, all plug producers are concerned about keeping it moist during shipment.

"Plugs must have just the right moisture content when shipped," Boring says, "so it's important that they be delivered to our customers within a two-day period. That is critical for plugs."

Country Acres relies on major airlines and Federal Express to get its orders delivered on time.

"The carrier depends on what the customer wants," Boring says. "Some growers will go into major airports to pick up their orders and others want them delivered to their door. We like to use



door-to-door service whenever possible.

"Federal Express offers deluxe service. It is the most expensive shipping method, but also the most reliable as far as getting an order delivered on time. If we need to get a shipment to a customer the next day, we can call Federal Express this morning and have the order delivered by noon tomorrow almost anywhere."

Boring says he does not like to use UPS for plug orders, although he uses that service occasionally for short distances.

"If the weather is the least bit threatening, we absolutely cannot ship UPS because an order can sit outside overnight in 10°F weather," he says.

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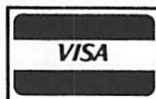
Listen to the positive comments from greenhouses around the country who work with Pleasant View Gardens. Notice how they emphasize the quality products and excellent, friendly service that Pleasant View has spent over 12 years developing. John Mohlenhoff, owner of Mohlenhoff Greenhouses, NY, elaborates:

"I like the grower to grower contact.

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very, very good rapport. They are always responsive to my needs and they allow me flexibility. I am absolutely pleased with the product they deliver."

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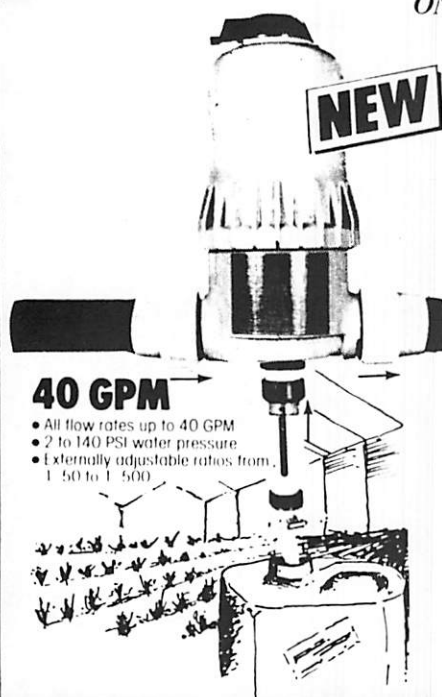
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"UPS will not give any kind of guarantee on frozen shipments. We just can't risk it."

He says delivery is scheduled when the order is placed. The customer can request delivery on a specific day.

"When the plugs arrive at the receiving location, they should be taken out of the boxes and tempered before being transplanted," Boring says. "Ideally, the plugs should acclimate two to three days."

He says that coordination of all the factors in plug production and shipping can produce a few headaches, but the whole process is easier when he can depend on efficient delivery of the product to his customers.

"There are a lot of details to stay on top of," he says. **GG**

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