



PLANTS ON THE MOVE

Freight with uncertainty

COVID-19 threw nursery shipping for a loop, but things settled and stayed strong

BY JON BELL

GARY “BERT” BERTLESON USED to have it pretty good in the summer.

The head of nursery over-the-road sales for **Integrity Logistics**, a freight shipping and trucking broker in Wilsonville, Bertleson would regularly take an entire month off in the summer. He was able to do so largely because of the seasonal slowdown in nursery shipping during the summer months.

That didn't mean he wasn't logging some hours. Bertleson would still make sales calls to customers and hit the occasional trade show, but it was far from the hectic nature of the busy spring season.

But not this year.

This year, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in demand for nursery products around the country — demand fueled by stuck-at-home folks sprucing up their yards like never before — there was no summer slowdown.

Trade shows were canceled or moved online, and early fall sales, which don't usually start until just before Labor Day, ramped up weeks earlier than normal and just kept going. “We have just been extremely busy all year. It's just amazing,” said Bertleson, who was himself a truck driver who hauled nursery stock for years until joining Northland Express Transport as a dispatcher in 1992. “My summers off are a thing of the past.”

COVID-19 has made a lot of waves this year, including across the nursery industry. People forced to stay home and not travel have spent more time remodeling their homes and freshening up their landscaping. That's boosted demand for plants, trees and other products.

Although some states initially closed nurseries and garden centers at the start of the pandemic, most were allowed to reopen as essential services, a move that has allowed business to continue at a steady clip.

The impact has been felt throughout the nursery industry, including on the freight side. Rates are up, as is demand. Drivers are still in short supply. Meanwhile, new restrictions have slowed loading, unloading and processing all around. Throw in the scorching wildfires that ravaged the West in September, and you've got a year for nursery shipping unlike any other.

“This is something that nobody expected,” Bertleson said. “It just dumped on us.”

Far from normal

In a more normal year, the shipping routine in the nursery business would ebb and flow a little more than it has this year. The big spring push to get product out in time for garden center and nursery sales around Mother's Day would be followed

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by a bit of a drop-off as the busy season waned for the slower summer months.

This year, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, it initially threw the industry for a loop of uncertainty.

“The pandemic put us in a place of the unknown immediately,” said Matt Frederick, logistics coordinator and owner at **K&M Distribution**, a transportation broker headquartered in Rogue River, Oregon.

He said new government guidelines were being implemented and changed, sometimes on an hour-by-hour basis. Some states had regulations that were more stringent than others, and nurseries and garden centers in some states were allowed to remain open, while in others they weren't.

“Some states were uncertain as to what they could or could not do,” Frederick said. “Sending product from the

West Coast to the East Coast or Southeast was challenging to coordinate as states opened and closed.”

In addition to the disruption caused by uncertainty, new rules on social distancing and contact complicated the situation even more. Where once a nursery might have four workers helping to load a truck, social distancing rules meant fewer people could be in a trailer or on the dock.

“That probably led to a little longer loading times,” said Dale Parra, sales manager at **Truck Transportation Services** in Wilsonville, Oregon.

Drivers, too, had issues early on when truck stops, restaurants and even rest areas closed, depriving them of places to stop, sleep and eat.

“During the shutdown, drivers stayed in their trucks,” Frederick said. “(They) didn't have the chance to stop for a meal

due to truck stops not being able to open up and were more isolated than usual. Nurseries worked hard to accommodate truckers, often providing them with snacks and beverages.”

Compounding the issues injected by the pandemic was the ongoing shortage of truck drivers. According to the American Trucking Association's “Truck Driver Shortage Analysis 2019,” the industry was short roughly 60,800 drivers in 2018 – an almost 20% jump over 2017. If current trends continue, that could climb to a shortage of more than 160,000 drivers by 2028.

Not only does that make it harder for nurseries to find carriers to ship their products, but combined with the strong demand during the pandemic, it also makes it more expensive. Frederick said he's seeing rates “we haven't ever experienced.”

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“When you’ve got 10 trucks and five loads, the trucks are fighting for the load and rates are low,” Bertleson said. “When you’ve got 10 loads and five trucks, now the rates go way up.”

Sticking together

Though COVID-19 has made for a challenging time in the freight business, once the initial shock subsided, nurseries and shippers adjusted to the new reality and things smoothed out a bit. Schedules may have been drawn out some and shipping rates may have stayed high, but products got shipped and delivered throughout the seasons to meet steady demand.

The September wildfires in Oregon knocked some shippers off course and created bottlenecks when nurseries had to close because of smoke and fire danger. But, as it has with other unforeseen circumstances in the past, the industry adjusted and adapted to get through.

The COVID-19 related demand that has kept the industry strong this year is expected to remain solid as the seasons shift from fall to the holiday tree and wreath seasons. Para said TTS is already hearing about large orders coming in for 2021. Bertleson said the holiday season should be a busy one, and then after that, it’s right back into bare root shipping season.

“It’s a never-ending cycle,” he said.

As for Frederick, he said the year has been a different and challenging one, but the industry and shipping for it has faced difficulties before — and gotten through them.

“This is a business with many, many good people, and we will continue to stay in tune with what is going on in our market,” he said. “I know it’s a cliché, but we honestly are all in this together. Consideration, flexibility and tolerance toward others will help us all work together better through these difficult times.” ☺

Jon Bell is a freelance journalist based in Oregon who writes about everything from craft beer and real estate to the great outdoors. His website is www.jbellink.com. He can be reached at jontbell@comcast.net.