



# Keep on trucking

The booming nursery industry has put big demands on the shipping sector

BY JON BELL

**A**BOUT A YEAR AGO, Gary “Bert” Bertelson was lamenting a lost summer. Before last year, Bertelson, head of nursery over-the-road sales for Wilsonville shipping broker **Integrity Logistics**, would take a month off every summer during the seasonal slowdown of the nursery shipping business.

But the explosive demand for plants and nursery materials, spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic and folks rediscovering their love of landscaping during the lockdowns, meant that the season never slowed – and Bertelson never got his month off.

In 2021, thanks to the continued boom in demand — and an array of other factors impacting the freight industry — his chances at a summer respite were even dimmer.

“It’s getting worse,” Bertelson said. “It’s as busy as springtime. It’s tough to keep up. It’s almost identical to last year, only probably 20% more. I don’t understand. People who never ship this time a year are ordering truckload upon truckload.”

Well into year two of the pandemic, the nursery industry continues to ride a wave of unprecedented demand. The early days of spring 2020 found people stuck at home, not traveling and instead dabbling in new pastimes like baking sourdough bread and, yes, landscaping. Nurseries, big box stores and garden centers sold out of plants in a hurry. The same thing happened this year, to the point that some nurseries are even selling next year’s inventory even though the year’s barely halfway over.

That’s all been good for nurseries, but it’s also put the squeeze on the freight and shipping end of the business. Trucks

and drivers are hard to come by, rates are sky-high and timelines are fluid at best.

In early September, wildfires had ramped up out West and Hurricane Ida and its rainy fallout inundated the East Coast — all of which added yet another layer of complexity to the business. In short: It’s been a busy but bumpy road for nursery shipping. And with no end to the new demand in site, it could be like that for the foreseeable future.

“I haven’t seen it slow down any,” Bertelson said. “I just don’t know what’s going to happen.”

## A promising year

No one could have foreseen the impact that COVID-19 pandemic was going to have on the nursery industry when it first materialized in 2020. Something else that no one really expected? That 2021 would be an even stronger year.

“It’s felt a little like a hurricane over here,” said Grace Dinsdale, whose **Blooming Nursery Inc.** saw a massive spike in sales in 2020 and then sold more plants in the first five months of 2021 than it had in the entire year prior.

That leap in business has had significant impacts on nursery freight and shipping. Matt Frederick, logistics coordinator and owner at **K&M Distribution Inc.**, a transportation broker headquartered in Rogue River, Oregon, said 2021 has so far been a promising year, but one that’s required a lot of flexibility.

“It’s been a year of constant adjustments, but it’s been 

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a great year,” he said. “I think the spring ran six weeks longer than normal, but even through the summer it hasn’t completely slowed down. There have been consistent shipments.”

### Boom and . . .

The boom has been good, but there have been some challenges, too.

“The huge increase in demand for goods of nearly every type drove a massive surge in transportation demand, and the supply chain was not able to keep up,” said Matt Nease, general manager at **Northland Express Transport**, a nursery-focused shipping company with offices in Oregon and Michigan. “That dramatic increase in shipping volume put incredible pressure on every link of the chain and revealed some major weaknesses: not enough drivers or trucking capacity, not enough cargo containers or in the right places. Rail lines, maritime shippers and ports all stretched to the breaking point.”

Despite a slight dip at the beginning of the year, the high demand has pushed rates up to record highs — and there’s likely no relief coming anytime soon. The continued driver shortage has compounded the difficulties in finding shipping options for growers. It, along with the huge demand, has made on-time shipping and delivery much harder to come by.

A labor shortage has contributed to timing delays, as well. Whereas a truck used to arrive, say, on a Saturday and be unloaded and ready for a pickup at 8 a.m. Monday morning, now the truck might pull in on Saturday and be standing by till it could be unloaded Monday night and on the road again by Tuesday.

Those kinds of delays have ripple effects across the industry.

“Plants can’t just sit on the docks for days because trucks are scarce,” Nease said. “That costs everyone more money in the long run as growers can’t invoice for their products until they ship and their customers can’t sell what they don’t have.”

Throw in natural disasters or other anomalies, and the situation worsens.

“It’s like with this hurricane that’s 



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going through New Orleans, FEMA's grabbing any and every refrigerator truck they can find," Bertelson said late in the summer. "That makes it even tighter."

**The great unknown**

As early 2020 showed everyone, it's incredibly difficult to predict just what's on the horizon. The same goes for the nursery industry and the shipping sector that gets plants where they need to be. At this point, there are no real signs that the industry will be cooling off at all in the near term. The pandemic continues to drag on, keeping people at home and in their gardens — and in garden centers buying plants.

"That might be the new normal," said Todd Watts, sales manager at Rosewoods Transportation Inc., a freight broker that specializes in nursery stock.

He also said he's hopeful that business

stays strong but he hopes there's a chance for everything to catch up a bit. In past cycles where shipping rates have risen, more drivers come back into the market, which even things out. Watts said that would help ease up the current situation.

"I'm hoping there are more trucks on the road by next spring," he said. "That's what it's going to take to help out."

In the meantime, nurseries can help loosen the tension by trying to be more flexible with their schedules rather than expecting trucks to arrive at a set-in-stone-time. Some shippers have turned to rail to help fill in the gaps and keep their customers happy.

Transparency and honesty all-around can also be key in managing customers' expectations when it comes to shipping rates, schedules and other factors.

"We just try to use honesty. That's

what everyone wants," Watts said. "We've always prided ourselves on that. We deliver the hard truths when we have to and hope that customers trust that we have their best interests in mind."

And no matter how the coming year unfolds, it will be important to learn from what has worked — and what hasn't — over the past year-a-half to keep the entire nursery industry moving forward.

"Challenging times and circumstances like we're experiencing inevitably lead to new methods and underscore those strategies that are truly critical when transportation capacity is so tight," Nease said. "Relationships really do matter." ☺

*Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is [www.jbellink.com](http://www.jbellink.com).*



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