

Disaster Relief

Post-Hurricane Considerations for the Commercial Nursery

In thinking about reestablishing buildings, plant inventory, and equipment, each nursery operator must evaluate his or her own situation after a hurricane and quickly decide on long- and short-term priorities. As a nurseryman, consider the needs of employees and provide them what they need so they can concentrate on reestablishing the nursery.

Short-Term Considerations

Irrigation

Irrigating salvageable plants containerized or planted after the hurricane is a short-term priority. Water resources suddenly become even more valuable after a hurricane because of possible contamination with saltwater and the difficulty in delivering water to plants via damaged or destroyed irrigation systems.

It seems ironic that too much water contributes to destruction one day, yet within a few days irrigation water may be difficult to obtain. But the irrigation water at your nursery may not be contaminated by saltwater if your property was not submerged in saltwater.

Water with an electrical conductivity of 1.5 dS/m (mmhos/cm) should be marginally suited for irrigation of most nursery crops, but monitor the conductivity of the container medium, even if you use water with 1 dS/m conductivity. Irrigation water of electrical conductivities below 1 dS/m are best.

You can lay temporary pipes, such as aluminum pipes, over land and water and deliver that water by large irrigation guns if the nursery irrigation piping system was destroyed. You can use electric generators or petroleum pumps to pump the water. Be sure to match water pumps with

appropriate-sized generators. If you don't, you could damage the generator and the pump.

Disaster Assistance

Contact your insurance agents, and apply for disaster assistance. In addition to insurance settlements, assistance is available from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Assistance is also available from Rural Development.

Document property damage with photographs or video. If possible, include an identifier in the photographs. The identifier associates the damage with your nursery. A house or barn in the background of a picture could be an identifier. You may want to include an insurance agent or other persons in photographs; these people can verify your claims.

Assess your inventory while placing plants upright, so you can account for not only for plants you can't sell but also those that were lost from the property. Some plants may recover, while others may die in a few days or weeks. So do not settle claims immediately, but ask for a partial settlement at first.

Remember that your customers are hearing news reports that may or may not be accurate. They need to hear from you as soon as possible. Let them know how you fared the storm, and reassure them you can continue to supply plants. When it comes to keeping good customers, there is no substitute for communication.

Claiming loss for physical structures and equipment is usually obvious, but also consider damage to supply inventories,

such as containers, fertilizers and pesticides. Check to see if fertilizers or pesticides were mixed or damaged. Consider insurance claims for replacing those items as well as costs for disposal and cleanup.

Plant Culture

Short-term production concentrates on removing plants from flooded areas, providing shade where needed, and preparing inventory for sale. Compact, low-growing plants generally survive a hurricane with less damage than more upright plants. Damaged plants may need pruning. Fertilizer may have been spilled from overturned containers. Reapply as needed. Wind-defoliated plants should make new leaves within a few weeks.

If your nursery grows plants in field soil, sample the soil to determine if salt levels could damage plants. Future sales should be good, because plants in many landscapes will need to be replaced. A short-term consideration is to purchase young plants that will be grown for future sales. Another option is to purchase mature plants for re-wholesaling. Both options will increase volume or inventory for future sales, but you may need more employees for a limited time. Also, you may lease land and equipment.

Long-Term Business Considerations

Long-term priorities should concentrate on the direction or focus of the nursery for the future. Now is the time to consider changes you thought about in the past and would implement only if you had the opportunity to do something over, but proceed carefully.

You should have a good recordkeeping plan and a safe place for those records. Web site or other online storage could be an option to keep important records.

Develop a business plan considering future markets. For example, you may change the predominant size of marketable plants or add cultivars to penetrate a new market, such as plants for water-conserving landscapes. Also, consider advancements in technology, and make changes based on recent research-based information. Ask yourself these questions:

- Can I use low volume irrigation?
- Do I need irrigation runoff recovery ponds and systems for recycling water?
- Do fuel and pesticide storage and pesticide waste facilities comply with current guidelines?

Planning for Future Disaster

Develop a written plan for pre- and post-hurricane responsibilities and job descriptions for staff. Make sure every staff member knows what to do after a disaster, including irrigating without electrical power or with a damaged irrigation system, ventilating the greenhouse, and cleaning after the hurricane. A back-up generator might be necessary if you don't already have one.

Your county Extension staff is a good source of additional hurricane recovery information. You may also visit their website at www.msucare.com. Now is the time to make changes for a prosperous and rewarding future!